

Seniors' Stories

Volume 7



FRONT COVER: ART OF AGEING 2020 EXHIBITION

Tim White

Peter Griffen b. 1948

Peter was a school teacher until 1979, when he quit to become a full-time abstract artist.

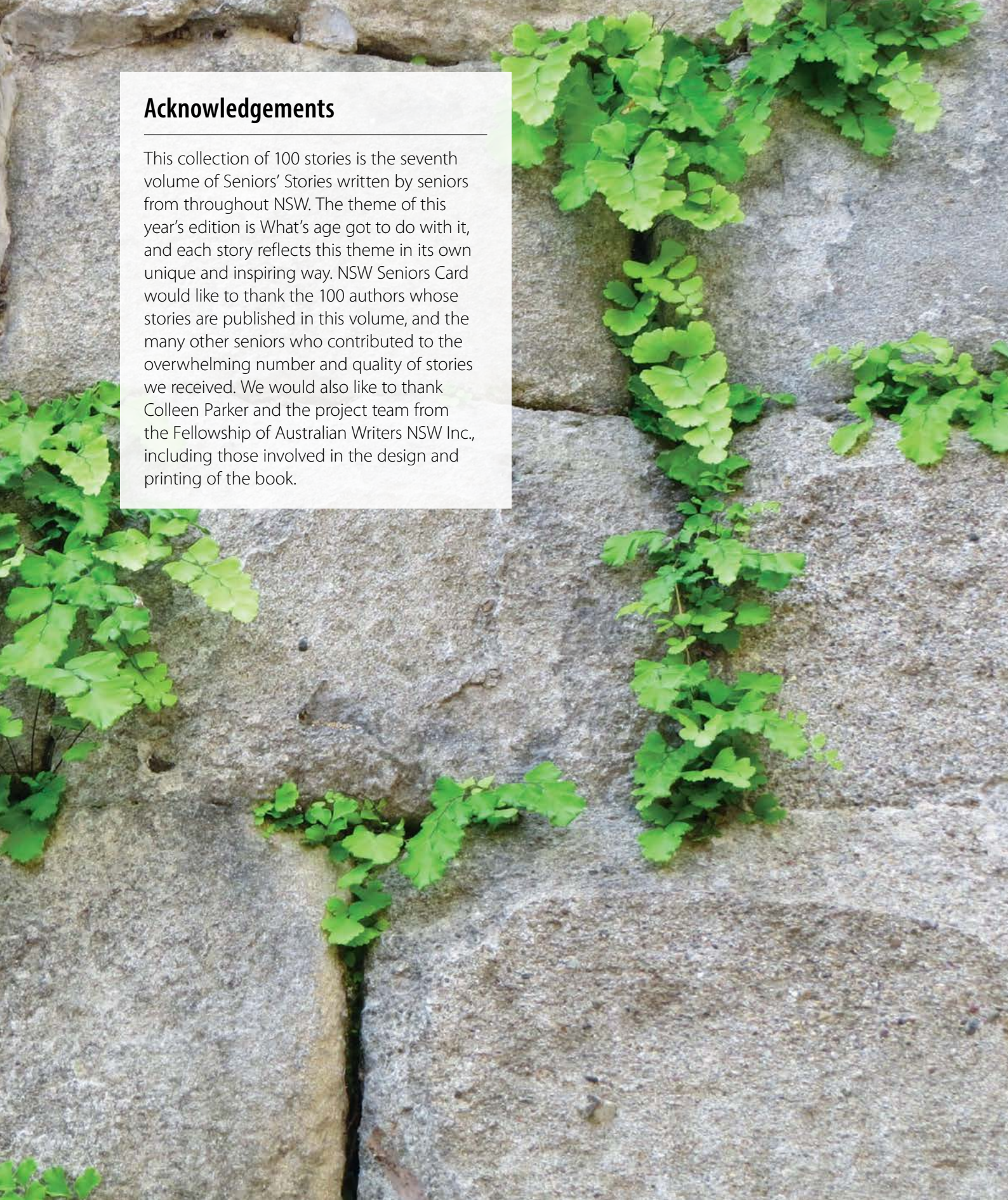
He now has had exhibitions across the globe, and is always busy painting, running classes, teaching and travelling.

His works adorn their Leichhardt warehouse home, The floor is covered with decades of paint, and there is a constant ordered chaos of paintings, equipment, projects and life.

"I believe that to make discoveries risks must be taken, the traveller must get lost. A well planned journey can only lead to an already known destination."

Acknowledgements

This collection of 100 stories is the seventh volume of Seniors' Stories written by seniors from throughout NSW. The theme of this year's edition is What's age got to do with it, and each story reflects this theme in its own unique and inspiring way. NSW Seniors Card would like to thank the 100 authors whose stories are published in this volume, and the many other seniors who contributed to the overwhelming number and quality of stories we received. We would also like to thank Colleen Parker and the project team from the Fellowship of Australian Writers NSW Inc., including those involved in the design and printing of the book.





A message from the Premier

Welcome to the seventh edition of Seniors' Stories. The stories in this publication are a fine example of the wisdom, talent and ability of our extraordinary seniors in NSW.

The theme of this year's book is 'What's age got to do with it' and the stories highlight the vast range of positive experiences and invaluable contributions that older people continually make to our society.

The NSW Government values and supports seniors' involvement in our communities and aims to help older people stay active, healthy and socially connected. We also want to ensure that younger generations are able to benefit from the years of experience and contribution to community life made by our seniors.

Story telling has long been a means of passing knowledge down from generation to generation.

Seniors' Stories is just one way of documenting and valuing the positive experiences of older people in NSW, and building connections between young and old.

Congratulations to all those that contributed their stories to this year's edition of Seniors' Stories. I encourage you to write more and share your stories in the knowledge that they are read and enjoyed by people of all generations now and in years to come.

Dominic Perrottet MP

Premier

A message from the Minister



I am very pleased to introduce the seventh instalment of Seniors' Stories and would like to congratulate each author for their contribution.

It is an honour to have the opportunity to serve the people of NSW, and I look forward to working with you all.

During the past year, Seniors Card and Senior Savers Card members were invited to contribute an original story around the theme 'What's age got to do with it? We were overwhelmed by the literary talent of seniors right across NSW who submitted their stories.

Telling stories is an age old tradition in all cultures. It's how we pass down knowledge and history through generations. By writing and telling stories, we gain an understanding of the diversity that exists in our local communities.

This latest volume of Seniors' Stories is just one way of recognising and valuing the experiences of NSW seniors and building connections between the young and old and encouraging older people to stay active, healthy and socially connected.

I hope you enjoy reading this wonderful collection of stories.

The Hon. Natalie Ward MLC
Minister for Seniors



What's age got to do with it?

I am me. Just me. I have always been me, from the beginning until whenever will be the end. I know that biologically there is not a single cell in my body that remains from when I was a newborn, and that I have shed and renewed every bit of myself continuously over the 64 years I have been alive. I can see the evidence of those imperfect regenerations every time I look in a mirror. But emotionally, consciously, essentially – I have remained unchangeably myself.

Outwardly I have changed, of course. The metamorphosis from newborn to 64-year-old is extraordinary. And, yes, my life experiences, education, the people I have met, loved, hated and feared have all had their impact. I have both grown and grown up. Now, I am shrinking in height (which is very annoying, I only ever made it to 155cms) but I continue to learn and grow and mature, not least how to manage while getting even shorter. Life still holds surprises (hello, world-wide pandemic) and lessons to be learned. Each one changes me in some way or other. But through it all, I remain quintessentially me. Particularly to myself. It feels the same to be me now as it ever did. And that's the thing I think that it takes every one of us a long time to realise – that however we may look to others, it's how we feel to ourselves that matters.

Ageing takes all of us by surprise, I think. I remember when I was young, I unconsciously assumed that old people had always been old. I knew intellectually that was nonsense but, intuitively, I just accepted their elder status as a constant. It suited me to do that then, because as they had always been old so I would always be young. The first time I got an inkling that might not be how things are was when I turned 26. I was working in advertising – with target audiences, often defined by demographics. For as long as I could remember I had been in the 18–25 year old bracket until suddenly one day I wasn't.

It struck me then that this ageing thing wasn't going to stop and that eventually (I remember this thought gave me a bit of a chill) I too would be old. It's good that back then (it must have been 1983) I did not yet realise just how quickly I would go from being young to being old. Time flies while you are busy living your life.

But has getting older upset me? Have I experienced it as a decline? Not so far. If anything, I am enjoying the youth of my old age – because that is how I optimistically think of 64 – more than any other period of my life. I have gained confidence and emotional security over the years. I am not as easily bruised or undermined as I once was. I think we call this getting a thicker skin. I am much clearer about where I stop and others start, which means if someone is abusive to me on social media, for example, I know that their nastiness says a great deal about them and absolutely nothing about me. Once you know that, it is easier to ignore the bullies.

My father, who is 89, says he defines old age as being the point when your past seems more exciting than your future. And I think that is true. Which is why tossing older people aside, warehousing them in Dickensian aged care homes and forcing them to leave the paid workforce long before they are ready can have such a damaging effect. In fact, I would argue that far from most people growing old in our society, we impose old age upon them, by too often taking away the very things that make looking forward more exciting than looking back. The appalling attitude of some to the fate of older people during this turbulent COVID pandemic – the casual cruelty behind decreeing that older people dying didn't matter or compelling them to live as prisoners in their own homes if they wished to avoid death, is classic ageism, of course, but it is worse than that. Had we succumbed to those who urged us to let the virus rip, we would have literally exiling an entire generation into old age, whether they were ready to go there or not.

Every person privileged enough to live to a grand old age feels about themselves the way we all do, as 'me'. That precious, indefinable essential self that remains constant to each of us from the beginnings of conscious thought. In the end, I believe that all the great liberation movements – the fights against classism, racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism and ageism all have the same goal. That we accept and respect the 'me' in us all and never assume that my 'me' is more important than yours.

By Jane Caro

Jane Caro's role as an influencer has been recognised through a Ministerial Advisory Council on Ageing (MACA) media award in 2021. The MACA Media Awards seek to challenge negative stereotypes towards older people by highlighting examples of balanced and realistic media reporting on older people and ageing.



From the Editor

The theme for this year in 2021 was, WHAT'S AGE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Never for one moment did I think that this theme would bring out so many creative ideas as it did.

Yes there were the many 'memoir' style stories among the hundreds of submissions we received and obviously when writers pondered their own age these came to the fore. Many dug deep into their memories to bring forward some delightful stories. What surprised me though, were the creative ways many writers were able to turn the theme question on its head and decide that 'age need have nothing to do with it', which is a truism and a worthy way for seniors to think.

I just loved the stories written with emotion, the ones where the writers longed to be their 'younger' selves again and with the limited years ahead for them, they decided to make that happen. They threw caution to the wind, realised they had fulfilled their commitments to everyone else during the course of their lives, but instead of, sitting back and feeling old they inhaled a deep breath and charged forward creating the life they deserved.

Some were very brave, attempting new activities either because they had always wanted to, but were never given the opportunity or because friends encouraged them to 'have a go'.

I found that some authors were a little 'cheeky' using innuendo because as seniors, we can. Others were quite 'matter of fact' and told their stories bluntly, but again that is often the way it has to be for seniors.

Most of all I hope you are as pleased as I am with the variety of short stories that the Fellowship has judged to be worthy tales of interest, fun, excitement, mystery and adventure for your readers of both genders to thoroughly enjoy!

I offer sincere congratulations to the one hundred successful authors published here in Volume 7 and thank you all for your participation in the Seniors Card project which affords so many members the opportunity to share their special stories.

In offering this publication to writers and readers everywhere I thank Seniors Card for giving me the opportunity and privilege to be on the Short Stories' team.

Colleen Parker



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I'm OK with Ageing

Jill AYLING

The way I see it, the sun comes up and goes down every day. We have sunny days and rainy days; days that are windy and days that are still. It can be breathtakingly hot or frosty cold and anything in between. Nowhere does the feeling of the light and air of each day touching my skin and my mind impact me more than by the ocean. And nowhere does the ocean feel more real and personal than at my holiday haven for the last 54 years, on the North coast of NSW.

My most recent holiday was with precious family members aged from 6 months to 67 years. Our days were a carousel of activities involving the beach, the creek, shared meals, and afternoon naps. Some went fishing and then shared their catch with the rest of us in an afternoon BBQ, with the beach being the highlight. Most of the mob spent mornings at the beach together. Some lazed under the beach umbrella, some swam, and some rode their surfboards. The youngest board rider was 7 years old, a first timer who astounded everybody by standing up and riding waves all the way in to the shore after only a few attempts. If the Aunts, Uncles, and Grandparents were a bit slow getting down to the water the kids would run ahead and then tell us to hurry up! A game of cricket on the beach was not limited to the fastest or most flexible. The only criteria to be on the team was to be there and have a go. The younger ones see lumps and bumps and wrinkles on the oldies, and they see grey hair and wonky knees, but they don't use these parameters to measure the fun to be had. They hear the groans and sighs as you negotiate the moves necessary to become upright from sitting on the beach. They don't judge, but they do imitate! The toddler groans and sighs just like Grandma does as he pushes himself off the beach to stand up but then takes off as quick as a flash, no wobbles!

"Age shall not weary them." These words inspire me to rise before dawn and reflect through the hazy first light on how blessed I am to 'feel' my age. This year I was sitting on a washed-up log on the beach, so it all felt so much more poignant as I listened on my phone to the Dawn Service from Canberra and snapped the first glimpse of the sun over the horizon. Images of photographs and grainy film clips of that first beach landing at Gallipoli played through my mind and drew emotions from my heart and tears from my eyes as I listened to the sounds of waves breaking on the deserted sand. The only other sound was from one bossy plover searching the sand for breakfast.

Later that day I walked from the beach over the rocks to the headland and watched the waves coming into the channel – it took me longer this year to get there as I carefully negotiated rock pools and sharp rocks. I wore solid shoes where once I would have worn thongs and instead of skipping across the ledges and crevices, I took the longer way round and across the flatter rock shelf. At the end of the journey, I sat on the highest rock and watched the ocean.

What did age have to do with it?

Nothing!

The same ocean waves came in and out, the same rocks were washed over with foamy water, and the same seaweed clung to the channel edges and washed in and out with the swell. The same vision was before me as was here over fifty years ago when I first discovered the channel. Yes, my age was different, and my journey a little slower but my thrill was the same.

On my last night in my personal paradise, I took my ritual evening walk to the bridge across the creek, stepping off carefully onto the cool damp sand of the beach. I took care not only to avoid the smelly seaweed clumps, but also to savour the sensations. I felt the soft sadness of having to leave and wanted to counter it by using all my senses to inhale the sounds, sights and smells, trying to take home with me enough joy to last until the next time. I saw again the canopy of stars and heard the movement of the waves coming and going as they have for aeons. I was also keenly aware that the next morning I would be saying goodbye to my family. The hugs and spoken sentiments would be held in my mind and in photographs for the days and months to come.

My age has nothing to do with whether the sun comes up and goes down. It has to do with how I spend the hours in between.

I am awake and aware.

My age has nothing to do with how the family I love include me in their lives. I love and am loved regardless.

My age has nothing to do with the deep appreciation of people who use some of their allotted days, some sacrificing all, to defend our freedom. I am grateful.

So, after all, what's age got to do with it? Everything!

With the benefit of a greater age comes greater appreciation and gratitude. The value of time increases as the number of years left diminish. I'm learning how to wait patiently for things to happen, while spending time on things and people I value. I'm ok with ageing.

The Proposal

Cheryl ANDERSON

Irene looked out over Brisbane Water. She liked to sit on her verandah, as the sun's last rays turned the water shadowed and moody.

Just like my life – light and shadow, she thought.

What do I do about this proposal? He's a nice man, we get on well, but I like this house and I have the security of knowing it's mine.

She remembered how things had been with Billy: a series of moves – he always did have itchy feet, never seemed to be able to settle. She needed to be settled – and safe. Apart from all that she wondered what the people she knew would say. She could hear it already; 'But Irene, you are sixty-nine. Getting married again? You must be mad. I can understand why young people get married, or shack up – don't they call it? But we're too old for all of that, surely? Fred and I sleep in separate rooms these days. His snoring keeps me awake and if I am in the other room then he can't get any ideas.'

Get any ideas? She thought to herself. I am old not dead and, if I am honest, I do like the company. This is the eighties, not the Dark Ages.

Much as she liked the ladies in her church group, many of them did not understand things which were outside their experience – and there was much outside their experience. She never told them that Billy was her fourth husband – the third one she'd buried. They never asked. Here she was, considering number five!

She hadn't sought out another relationship, these things just seemed to happen to her. This time it was all due to Cath, her neighbour, who came to her house one day, at her wit's end. "What am I going to do? Harry is due in three weeks and I haven't got a clue where he is going to stay. My house is too

small and everything around here, that is reasonably priced, is full up. You have a spare room Irene and didn't you say you were going to visit your sister?" Cath pleaded, sounding like a child begging for an ice-cream.

"Oh no Cath, don't do this to me. Have a strange man in my house? I'm not sure I would be comfortable with that and you know how people around here talk."

"But Irene you won't be here. You will be away for at least two weeks, visiting your sister, so you don't even have to meet him. I know I am biased – he is my brother after all – but he is house-trained and he is an honest man. Please? Pretty please?"

"Stop it, Cath. Enough! Alright I'll do it – but against my better judgement."

"Oh, thank you so much. You won't regret it."

"I hope not, I'll hold you responsible if it goes wrong."

"What do you mean you have a strange man in your house?" Mary, her sister, asked.

"Cath was stuck and I gave in but I don't feel really comfortable with a strange man in my house. Now you're over your 'flu I think I'll go home early."

So, Irene returned home. The 'strange man' was a true gentleman; very respectful and conscious of her generosity in sharing her home.

"I owe you a great debt," he said as he was leaving. "If ever you get down to Tassie, I would like to return the favour for your kindness in having me stay."

Lovely of him to say but he's just being polite, she thought to herself, as he drove off with Cath to catch his train.

Irene turned away, never expecting to hear from him again and was very surprised when his first letter arrived, begging her to visit. Their letters flowed back and forth in waves of conversation, up and down the coast, awakening a desire she thought never to feel again.

I am only going for a holiday.

Are you sure? She asked herself, as she boarded the plane to Hobart.

Harry was courteous and spared no effort to make her feel welcome. They went to all of his favourite places, finding much in common as they laughed and chatted together. When it came time to leave, he asked her to stay.

He proposed.

"It's such a big decision. I couldn't leave my family. It's too far," she replied, leaving the matter unresolved. They said their goodbyes at the airport, assuring each other they would keep in touch.

She arrived home to an empty house. The phone rang, echoing in the silence.

"Irene, what if I move to New South Wales?"

"Let's not rush. Could we both take a couple of days to think this through?"

Once she said 'yes', the arrangements moved swiftly. The wedding reception, held in Mary's home in the Blue Mountains was accompanied by the inevitable questions and innuendo; "Going on a cruise for your honeymoon? So, are you having separate cabins?"

Irene lowered her eyes and almost blushed.

"No dear, only one. Do you know what these cabins cost?" She had fielded more difficult questions than these: divorced at twenty-five in a time when divorce was a source of shame. She had been wise to rid herself of Bob and his callous barbs which passed for humour.

Bob's irreverent sense of humour was also in his granddaughter's thoughts, as she looked on; "I bet if Grandpa was here, he would want me to ask Harry if Nan still had the mole on her left hip."

Returning from her honeymoon, Irene spoke mostly of the scenery and the food. Lying in bed, she thought back to the cruise and her decision to marry Harry. The soft touch of fingers on her skin brought her back to the present.

'Again?' They asked.

'Oh, yes,' her own touch replied, as Harry's head vanished under the covers.

"Oh, yes," she murmured, "lower."

Marrying again was such a good decision, she thought.

Sunshine and Breezes

Beth BARONS

Breezes blew through the days of my childhood and youth. Soft gentle breezes blowing through warm sunshine across bright peaceful gardens.

Behind our house when I was small, was an old neglected garden where flowers dipped and nodded in the sun as we played among them. Gentle violets and snowdrops looked up at us, pink camellias hung among shiny green leaves and in the springtime, streamers of white may bush and mauve wisteria waved over the garden. An unending parade of insects moved the air with sound. Lizards lay drowsily in the sun's warmth, birds sang high in the old trees while crickets chirped and frogs croaked in hidden pools.

At one side of the garden stood an enormous pile of square golden sandstone blocks which to us children resembled a castle. Here we climbed and scrambled about, following each other and jumping from block to block through 'our castle'. We climbed up walls, stood high on towers and hopped down great steps. We looked for soft green velvet moss on the shady side and for lizards and beetles on the sunny side. Sometimes we set out little cloths and food and we picnicked on top of the stones, all the while chattering with each other as we made daisy chains and posies of flowers while filling small baskets with bright blooms to carry home. We would leave 'The Stones' to chase each other down long-forgotten mossy paths which wound around the garden under twisted branches and green leaves and hide from each other in secret shaded places.

At the very bottom of the garden beside gnarled peach and persimmon trees was an old tennis court where we bounced balls and threw them to each other laughing happily all the time.

An exciting excursion was a visit to Manly on the ferry. As it crossed the harbour we looked at something which fascinated us, Balmoral, where we saw long lines of stone seats which we were told were built long ago by a group of people who believed in the immediate second coming of Jesus Christ. So surely did they believe He would arrive that they knew the exact date and the fact that He would appear to them at sunrise, walking on the water towards them through Sydney Heads. On the appointed morning, these believers gathered on the seats and waited in anticipation, but Jesus didn't come, so the seats were abandoned for years, gradually crumbling away.

So interested were we children in these seats and the story which went with them, that one day Mum took us by train and tram to Balmoral and the seats. We found that they were arranged in tiers of great white marble slabs. Nasturtiums, lantana and other bright flowers climbed over them while lizards and insects moved out of our way as we clambered about. In warm sunshine we sat on the seats to eat our lunch while gazing out through The Heads, trying to imagine the excitement of the crowd which had once sat picturing the scene they were hoping to see. We tried to feel and understand their disappointment when nothing happened. Somehow the visit to those seats was sad.

Later, with two friends I went hitch hiking through Britain and Europe. In Florence I had one of the most beautiful experiences of my life. We were there in the springtime and on one warm afternoon decided to visit The Uffizi Gallery. There were very few people in the gallery and we wandered about slowly and happily from picture to picture until we reached a room where many of Botticelli's paintings were hanging. At one end of this room two pictures, *The Rite of Spring*, and *The Birth of Venus*, hung opposite each other with a window in between. We were the only people in the room, the window was open and a gentle flower-perfumed breeze blew in. As I gazed from one picture to another I had the feeling that I was somehow in those paintings. The leaves on Botticelli's trees rustled, the grass swayed, the flowers nodded and the depicted people laughed and whispered among themselves as I stood there in that magic among them all.

In Venice on a sunny morning we visited the island of Murano to watch glass blowers at work. While there, I couldn't restrain myself from buying a box of six wine glasses, delicate, round and beautifully etched with leaves. In their box they were wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. I continued hitchhiking with a backpack on my back, one free hand, and the box of wine glasses carefully carried in my other hand. Those glasses travelled through many warm, breezy countries and we still drink from them today.

One bright springtime when I was living in England with my Aunt Freda who was renowned in the world of British music, I told her I was going up to the May Ball at Cambridge and she was very excited. She had a connection to Cambridge and owned an exquisite Sixteenth Century necklace of gold leaves set with pearl flowers which she told me to wear to the ball. I said I couldn't wear such a valuable item but she insisted and hung it round my neck. I wore that necklace for the whole weekend without once taking it off.

On that same happy weekend I attended a concert of works by Ralph Vaughn Williams who was also in attendance. He was a friend of my aunt and she told me to give him a message from her but I was so overwhelmed by his great presence that I could barely speak, let alone convey the message.

Time and distance fill the past with happy memories. Some memories are spoken and words blow away on the wind. Other memories are precious and written down. Age does not matter when happy memories remain.

A Modest Angel

Barbara BARRETT

I anticipated celebrating my aunt's hundredth birthday in March 2021.

Auntie Helen was an amazing woman and filled her life with action in the service of others. Described as a modest angel after being interviewed around her *eightieth* birthday; 'life isn't easy so I just went ahead and did the best I could'.

Graduating with a triple certificate in nursing, Helen volunteered with Anglican Missions Abroad in 1946. For nearly forty years she walked mountains on muddy tracks, waded across swiftly flowing rivers, and boated to outlying villages of the Solomon Islands. Her skills developed: substituting as doctor, dentist, veterinarian (midwifery had only semi prepared her for delivering piglets and calves), nutritionist, community developer, carer for orphans, and teacher. Communication was irregular, materials were in short supply, improvisation was often required, and negotiations were needed when cultural differences intervened with treatments.

Retirement was not on her agenda.

Renowned for her educational support of girls and mothers, Torres Strait beckoned for her assistance in reviving their Mothers' Union. Six months lengthened to eight years of service. Delicate negotiations with village headmen to improve community developments, especially for mothers and their families, required Helen's special skills.

Relating many stories from her experiences, her tales entertained, educated and enthralled her many audiences on her intermittent returns. As a diplomat, organiser and motivator, friendships were realised between unfamiliar groups whose interaction she encouraged. Cultural differences had kept one such meeting seemingly impossible. "We've got to learn to accept each other and the differences in each other."

As a baby, Helen learnt to walk aboard a ship. Arriving in Australia, she gained her land-legs, "waiting for the earth to come to me" and kept walking. She never learnt to drive but was a most observant passenger, able to provide advance navigation, lane changes and interesting details often missed by others. The bus routes were well known, with even time to purchase and eat a packet of chips whilst waiting en route. If any opportunity came up for an excursion, or travel to reconnect with people, she was a willing participant. Returning to the Solomon Islands in her *eighties*, she commented that a 'usual', three hour hill-walk took six hours on that occasion. With stairs to her home in Brisbane, her legs remained strong and well used.

Welcomed back to Brisbane in her *seventies*, she set about attending meetings, conferences, theatre, concerts, volunteering at the Princess Alexandra hospital, and even after her diagnoses with Parkinson's, continued delivering Meals On Wheels to 'others less able' into her *eighties*. Her home was open-house to visitors, and occasionally bulged at the seams with overnight guests; her company sought for her wisdom, care and compassion.

For her *ninetieth* birthday, a special event was held at her former school: a much admired School captain whose life and career portrayed as exemplary for students. She always thoroughly enjoyed meeting and talking with the students. The last occasion being the 90th birthday of the school. Her 98th year.

Keeping informed of local, national and world events necessitated avidly reading daily newspapers. A Queensland University Emeritus Professor regularly emailed her news of the Solomon Islands. She joined her local library on her *ninetieth* birthday. The internet extended her horizons and with assistance, enthusiastically collected up-to-date information for her presentation about a Mothers'

Union in Africa. Television news, often sending off alarm bells, would motivate her to write to persons of influence. Friends kept regularly in touch from around the world. A gap year student who visited the Solomons in the Sixties updated her experiences as she transferred to various countries with Red Cross. A reunion fifty years later was a memorable thrill for both.

Moving into a Care facility eventuated as she turned *ninety-four*. Assured that it would be one move; with transition care in place, she agreed. Bequeathing her significant treasured collection of memorabilia to the Queensland Museum took a week of cataloguing. A very appreciative archivist noted how articulate and impressive her memory was when relating to the articles.

Her busy 'outside' life continued after her relocation. One resident asked her, "How is it Helen, that you go out all the time?"

Her response, "I just phone for a taxi."

Often family and friends were rallied to ensure that her valued activities continued. Within the residence she rarely missed meetings and became a persuasive spokesperson for the reserved. Always willing to help others, and ready with a smile and a word of thanks for anyone offering her assistance.

Mail arrived on a daily basis and sorted into piles covering surfaces, whilst awaiting replies. Perhaps a frustration for staff when trying to clean; being given strict instructions to leave the stacks untouched. Knitting materials and a sewing basket were always within reach. Never idle hands.

A wheelchair was sought after a fall, but looked on with disdain. It was stored for years whilst Helen became proficient with her red wheelie walker. (Red obviously goes faster!) Exercises were religiously performed. Maintaining independence was so important.

On a visit to a QPAC Ballet in 2015 she was trapped in a crowded malfunctioning lift whilst help was sought from maintenance staff. The lift dropped floors to the basement. Helen maintained her calm and offered her wheelie walker seat to another younger person who appeared to be under more duress.

When a Health Directive was planned with her doctor, in her *mid-nineties*, she remarked that she wanted to be revived as she had lots to live for. "Medical science is improving all the time." Updating her knowledge never ceased.

Her daily prayer: "Thank you for the food we eat, and make us mindful of the needs of others" was a mantra guiding her life. Medical and educational support always in the offering.

I'm sure she didn't stop to consider her age.

With fifteen months to her 'very special birthday', she slipped quietly from this life, leaving behind exalted memories of her love, care and compassion.

Mirror, Mirror

Elaine BELL

As I gaze into the mirror, I scarcely recognise the face staring back at me. Where did all those lines come from? Those creases? Has it really been 60 years?

For just a moment, I'm taken back to a time when that face was smooth and glowing, no wrinkles. The hair was thick and glossy, waves flowing over my shoulders. The eyes, bright and shiny, clear and sharp. I can vividly remember a time when I was young and full of energy when I first met him. I can see him now, next to me...

It was a gorgeous day when we first met in the Whitsundays, the sun reflecting on the azure water, a light breeze in the air. He was ruggedly handsome with a cheeky grin etched onto his suntanned face. "Let's go for a dive" he yelled, nearly pushing me into the water. Off we went, chasing the rainbow fish along the reef.

It was an amazing two weeks we spent together and when it was time to say goodbye, we realised that we just weren't ready. So we made arrangements to meet up in a month's time when we would both be in Sydney.

I was nervous to meet him again, thinking he might not seem as alluring as he was the first time we met. But the minute I laid eyes on him, it felt like coming home and I sensed how special he was becoming to me. He had already organised tickets to climb the Sydney Harbour Bridge followed by a delicious lunch on the harbour. We were perched high above the sparkling water and although I was a bit nervous, he made me feel safe at his side.

The next day, he had planned a long drive and hike in the Blue Mountains. We talked non-stop in the car and never ran out of things to say. He always had a funny joke to tell and a cheeky grin, very irresistible! We walked for ages along the canyon's narrow trail, stopping only for a drink and a quick lunch. As we were nearing the end of the track, my step faltered and I twisted my ankle, yelping in pain. "Are you okay? Here, let me help you," he said in concern as he pulled me up and let me lean on him as we struggled to the top of the hill.

"You did that just to get me to help you along, didn't you?" he laughed. Then he leaned close and gently kissed me on the lips, stirring butterflies throughout my stomach.

That was the beginning of our relationship and we became inseparable...until it was time for me to return home to the U.S. I was in tears the entire day before my flight, knowing that I would never lay eyes on him again. "It was just a holiday romance and you will just have to face it," I whispered as I cried myself to sleep on the plane.

Before I knew it, I had arrived home to my empty, quiet house. But almost as soon as I put my key in the door, the phone started ringing. In those days, we only had landlines, mobile phones hadn't been invented! I took my time to answer, expecting it to be someone in my family checking that I had arrived home safely. To my surprise, it was him, calling to say 'hi' and that he missed me already!

We tried to carry on a conversation, but there was so much delay in the connection that we ended up just laughing and only catching the occasional word, but it was enough just to hear his voice and know that he had been thinking about me. We kept in touch weekly then, writing letters and taking it in turns to ring each other. There was no Facetime or even internet back then so it was difficult to stay in touch. But we managed until one day he rang to say that he was going to visit me on Boxing Day, would I like that?

We had loads of fun just being together again and experiencing the sights of my hometown. We froze together on a ski lift in sub-zero temperatures with a chilling wind factor before racing down the icy slopes. We went on a road trip and explored new places that I had never even been to. We made plans to travel to Europe together one day and before I knew it, he asked me to marry him. I said "Yes!" without giving it another thought.

And so our wedded lives and many adventures began. He became my local tour guide, showing me new areas and sites to explore each weekend. Sometimes we camped overnight in national parks, found new beaches to swim at and laze in the sun and discovered mountains to hike and explore.

Before we knew it, our lives became full with the arrival of our first son, followed shortly by another and then, a baby daughter. Our lives were complete and we began to share our adventures with the kids, flying overseas to visit family with special stops to Disneyland and Pacific islands on the way. And as the children became adults and had their own lives, we began travelling overseas, riding camels in Egypt, swimming in waterfalls in Croatia, diving from our private deck at an overwater villa in the Maldives. It didn't matter where life took us, we still enjoyed each other's company and lived life to the fullest.

Although we were ageing, I wanted to remember all those wonderful moments in our lives and the special love that we shared. Just then, as I blinked back into focus, there he was in the mirror, his reflection next to me – less hair, his face as creased and wrinkled as was mine, but still ruggedly handsome. "Are you ready for our hot air balloon ride, Darlin?" he asked. "Can't wait," I replied, as our next adventure begins.

The Ruffian

David BERGER

Two months after I turned 71 I married for the third time. It was nothing I was seeking in particular. I was content in my solitude but life is indeed paradoxical and nuanced. Two months after our marriage I became a widower.

She was my friend and I had known her for a year but she was in a long term de facto relationship with another man. We enjoyed chatting together at the club and had many laughs over several glasses of wine, although we were both on the pension. It became clear that she was not happy, her partner was abusive and controlling. She also had some serious medical problems: her bowel cancer was 'cured' by a colo-rectal operation so she wore a plastic colostomy bag attached to the side of her abdomen to collect her waste. She also had liver disease which turned out to be cancerous and, as she had previously suffered from malnutrition, she had poor vision and could not walk well.

We got on famously while her partner kept playing the poker machines. She was not happy at home and was totally reliant on him. After getting to know her so well and feeling more than sympathetic towards her I said, 'If you want to jump, I'll catch you.' One Saturday afternoon she jumped!

That very afternoon, unprepared as we were, she came to live with me. Of course there were scenes, but she was joyful. In bed she turned to me and said, 'You had better watch out, a ruffian has moved in with you. I'll keep you on your toes!' We both laughed.

For two glorious months we had a ball. I hired a wheelchair and we would tear off to the shops and cafés. At home we listened to music and we danced in my lounge-room with her standing on my feet as I moved around the floor. Her own feet couldn't cope. We used to have fruit banquets and she enjoyed my cooking. Except for the lentils. I am vegetarian but made no attempt to convert her. She seemed content with a non-meat diet at home but sometimes ate meat or fish when we were out.

One Saturday I took my Christian wife to my synagogue and after the service she revelled in the wonderful Jewish food, especially the herring. The other women made a fuss of her and she giggled when they pushed me away so that they could hold hands and chat with her. She was very happy and a few days later she asked me to marry her. At my age? At her age?

I said 'yes' and then she said, 'Now you have to ask me, three times!'

We began to make plans and paid the necessary fees. We printed out a few invitations, not for the wedding but for a reception a week later. Then things turned upside down. Her medical condition deteriorated to give her a painful existence. One morning she woke up with yellow eye balls and the doctors said those dreadful words: 'palliative care'. We couldn't believe it, but she was admitted to hospital. Our marriage ceremony went ahead with a bedside service on the ward.

'What did you get up to on your wedding night?' the nurses joked with her the next day.

Two weeks later she was transferred to an aged-care residence and never walked again. I had the immense privilege of washing her every morning, brushing her dentures and putting them back upside down, managing her 'bag', helping her to eat, lifting her around the bed, reading and chatting to her. We both lost a lot of weight.

We were married in March and she died in early May, two months after she 'jumped'. We lived together for two months, unwed. Then lived apart for two months while wed.

Her lovely ancient mother told me that my bride was very happy with me. One day my lady, speaking on the phone, said to her friend 'I've got a new life', to which her friend said, 'No, darling, now you've got a life'.

She was genuinely happy. As was I. Two old codgers defying the norm.

I went through an experience which many older husbands go through. But it was different for me: I was a new 'hubby' at the age of 71, long-retired, with little money, enjoying my freedom and solitude.

But the call had come. Someone needed help. What's age got to do with it? You just have to jump in there and give what you can to make another's life just a little bit more enjoyable and tolerable. The ruffian was four years younger than I but she experienced happiness with an old grey beard. Now I have a couple of photos, our wedding rings and an ancient Corinthian amphora filled with her ashes.

What's age got to do with it?

Nothing! You just gotta do what you've gotta do.

I Didn't Know

Maureen BEVERLEY

In 1936 while the drums of war were rehearsing, I was practicing voice control, uttering sounds like 'mama and dada' and when I smiled up at my adoring grandma, I didn't know what joy she felt.

It was 1940 and the house was shaking and bombs were falling, when I ran out from under the table where my family was sheltering. I chuckled with delight to see the fireplace dancing, before I was pulled back. At dawn there was an eerie silence when we joined neighbours gathered at the end of the street overlooking Manchester, England. We were overwhelmed by the sight of the city burning. While I was gleeful to see a flickering red and pink landscape, I thought it had been lit by fairies. That night the Germans had bombed Manchester, destroying houses and factories and killing 800 people. One of the bombs that dropped onto Stockport killing my Uncle Stan but I didn't know.

I recall Daddy hugging me and feeling his prickly herring bone overcoat against my face. I didn't know he was leaving our home in Stockport to join the army or that he would be away for six years. Stockport was a small town in North West England, where rows of terraced houses peep over another row on the sides of the valley. These were spanned by a red brick viaduct with 27 arches, 546 metres long and 33.8 metres above the River Mersey. A river born in surging foam, churning and swirling, when the rivers Tame and Goyt collide, merge and then swiftly flow past factories with tall chimney's billowing smoke and onwards through meadows and towns towards Liverpool and the Irish Sea.

Before the Blitz, a factory was built on farmland in Stockport so despite the destruction of premises in Manchester, the production of aircraft for the R.A.F. continued. I knew mother had gone to make, Spitfires, but not that when she left me at Grandma's without a word, they would be the happiest days of my life and when mother visited, I hid. I recall Grandfather carrying me into the air-raid shelter made of corrugated iron, dug into the garden and covered with flower beds, the only furniture was bunk beds. During air-raids when the thunderous sounds and ground tremors kept us awake, my folk sang loudly.

When bunkered down in the cramped shelter dimly lit by a paraffin lamp I have never forgotten the low groan of the approaching Luftwaffe getting louder, joining in the harmony was the rapid 'ack-a'ck' of artillery fire, the soloist a whistle of a passing bomb. This War Time Symphony reached a finale with a loud clash as the bomb landed, heralding the destruction of life and property. Then another wave of Luftwaffe approached to play an encore. My folk were stoic, reassuring me that Daddy's guns kept us safe, but I wasn't scared, I knew there had always been air-raids. In the morning my folk went to work, as did my elderly teacher who would 'nod off' at her desk; but I didn't know why!

My Auntie took me on a tram to visit a man and woman and I overheard her telling them that her husband Bill had been killed in Burma. They were very sad but they didn't cry. I knew no one should cry, because I grazed my knee and grandma painted it with iodine, I had to be a brave little soldier and not cry. During the ride home, Auntie was sad, so I cuddled her and she tried to smile. I didn't know where Burma was or that day's event would be etched in my memory, where Bill's face would never age.

I had started school and on Saturdays I was taken to the 'pictures' holding my toffee ration. In August we had a holiday by the seaside, where some of the beaches had rolls of barbed wire, barring the way. One exciting holiday was when a convoy of fishing boats returning from the cold, grey, Icelandic seas having braved German gun boats, sailed up the river Wyre, cheered enthusiastically by people along the riverbank; but I didn't know why?

The first time I heard of 'Australia', was when Aunty told grandma that the ships from Australia 'had got through' and I also heard that the sultanas and prunes the ships brought were un-rationed. I was in awe when Grandma said that before the war gas lamps lit the streets and at Christmas time windows were festooned with lights. Gazing up at grey barrage balloons hovering around factory chimneys, I wished they were Santa Claus's red sleighs.

I didn't know where Australia was or that one day I would live there and again see another beautiful colour scheme executed by nature; terrible tongues of fire that consumed all around in a roaring rage. Now, I know that the flaming landscape and the sky's magnificent colour was not the work of fairies.

I love my adopted Australian homeland with 'all her beauty and her terror', so aptly described in Dorothea Mackellar's poem, My Country. I've done my level best, while zigzagging along the bumpy path of life. My loneliest path and most depressing time was enduring the solitude of Covid 19 pandemic lockdown, when a broken bone restricted my mobility and I felt abandoned. It was then I decided to write a novel set in 1709 about German refugees. The connection I felt with my story's characters made me feel included in life again.

I may not finish my novel before the pathway ends, but I'm grateful that life's paths have guided me to a time when, like my grandma before me, I can enjoy the smiles of my great grandchildren, happy in the knowledge that they are Australia's future and mine; but they don't know that.

I do know that at any age there is always something else to do and 'I will never know, what I don't know'.

Volunteering in English Classes for the Community

Valerie BIRD

'We're looking for volunteer tutors for our English classes.'

This request from my church minister resonated with me. I had retired from teaching English to children who had little or no knowledge of English at the end of the previous year, so this request was something that I was qualified to do – for children anyway. I thought it would be interesting to tutor adults and it would also help to form a bridge for the English-speaking and non-English speaking people in my very multicultural community.

The following Monday morning I turned up at the church hall and was assigned to a Chinese speaking pastor who led the Beginner's Class. He spoke in their first languages, mostly Mandarin but also Cantonese. The students were mostly in an older age group and in Australia to be with their children, often helping in caring for their grandchildren.

Unfortunately, when the grandchildren started school, they started to lose their first language and their grandparents found it difficult to communicate with them. This was one reason why they were keen to learn English. Another was to be able to interact with the mainstream English-speaking community. Finally, coming to class was an opportunity to interact with people outside their family. It was a chance to make friends. In fact, a few years later, a group in one of the classes went on a trip together.

The following year I had my own class at an intermediate level and I continued at this level for nine subsequent years. Students at an intermediate level can understand and make conversation on everyday subjects. Again, the students were mostly older than 60 but some were younger. I admired their commitment and enthusiasm to learn English.

They were determined to connect with the community. I also admired the volunteer tutors who assisted in the class. Some spoke Mandarin or Cantonese and could explain the meanings of different words or cultural practices in this language. Others, mostly of retirement age, spoke English only but wanted to help with our new neighbours.

At the end of each year we had a concert and party to celebrate the year's successes. Many of the classes sang songs. 'I am Australian' brought a wiping of the eye for many of us. Our class often performed a short skit which brought a lot of laughter to the audience. Everyone brought a plate of finger food and we shared our different foods at the close of the concert. On one memorable occasion we had a birthday cake and sang Happy Birthday to our oldest student who was turning 90. He had been a captain of a boat which worked along a river in Burma.

After a few years, we had between 60-90 students each week with around 30 volunteer tutors in 7 classes from basic beginners to advanced speakers. One of the tutors had an idea to create a book of stories. Students wrote about their life in their homeland or their new life in Australia. Tutors helped with translating or editing their writing. Who would have thought that you could warm your feet in snow? One student explained how when relating his story about digging a trench in a work gang in China during the Cultural Revolution. The richness and variety of everyone's experience shone through. We had a wonderful book launch at which many local dignitaries attended. A few years later we had also made a website where stories from both students and teachers were displayed.

Once Covid came in March 2020 our face-to-face classes had to stop. After a few weeks, when it looked like they were not going to start for some time, we started up a Zoom and phone class for the Intermediates. We were uncertain about it as we were not greatly confident with Zoom but, after a few technical difficulties, it worked out well. It was reasonably easy to share photos of favourite trips, garden plants, etc. and talk about them.

Talking on the phone is one of the hardest things to do in another language, but the students progressed noticeably in this. After a while, Covid restrictions eased somewhat so we went on the occasional hike in our area. These were extremely popular, and our students displayed their technology skills on their smart phones in finding out the names of plants along the way. My fellow tutor was particularly good at taking group photos using a small flexible tripod and showed us how to share photos using Airdrop. What's age got to do with learning how to use technology?

Some classes, with reduced numbers and in compliance with Covid restrictions, returned to the hall towards the end of 2020 but our Intermediate Class continued from home until Term 2 in 2021. Then, we went back in the church hall again with students (all aged over 60) from China, Korea and Indonesia. There was a lot of talk and laughter as we shared stories from our old lands and new. I wondered, "What's age got to do with moving to a new country and learning a new language?"

After class, many tutors (all retired) share a coffee together and I look at them and I think "What's age got to do with providing a useful service to the community?" In fact, age enhances the learning of languages and sharing of cultures as there is so much more to appreciate when one has gained so many life experiences.

Child's Play

Lance BOWDEN

Having ordered a white coffee and a chocolate donut, I am encouraged to sit at a table overlooking the garden. Small but adequate in size, the elevated floor is about one and a half metres above the ground and offers the perfect sanctuary for my grandson, Lincoln, to ply his culinary skills. And this morning I have been invited to have morning tea with him.

With the bravado of youth, the inspiration of a chef, and the movement likened to a bull in a china shop, Lincoln fills the cubby house with the banging of the oven door, the crashing of plates, and the loud ringing from utensils as he pours the coffee and retrieves the donut from the floor. Fortunately, all the items including the coffee and donut are made of plastic.

"Yummy, thank you Lincoln. This donut is delicious, here try some". Small praise for the exuberant way morning tea was prepared.

Fortunately, our conversation and actions are not formed from plastic. They are real feelings of appreciation, of a bond between two human beings whose lives happen to be linked through genetics, two human beings at opposite ends of life's scale, yet two lives participating and thriving.

With morning tea over (don't worry about cleaning up, it's okay), I have one of three choices to make getting down from the cubby house: the timber climbing wall with its large, yellow rosette shaped grips, the yellow slippery dip or the timber ladder. Lincoln's encouragement defines the moment and I choose the ladder. Safely on the ground, I am given no choice as Lincoln's hand reaches out for mine and together, we arrive at another ladder; the trampoline.

"Take off shoes," calls Lincoln excitedly.

I take off my shoes and place them neatly at the base of the ladder. My actions are mirrored by this person who has just raised my uncertainty about my physicality and my being able to play on this piece of seemingly, unforgiving apparatus.

"Ah, what the heck, I'm in," I say under my breath, while at the same moment being assisted up the ladder and onto an unstable, highly sprung surface surrounded by netting. Balance is king and I steady myself against the wave of jelly like movement that is being created by one very active bouncing grandson. Lincoln's fine, long blond hair appears to leave his head as he bounces, and the more he bounces, the more static electricity seems to be attracted to his hair, creating a 'mad professor' look and which Lincoln finds highly amusing.

Then a third person starts bouncing and moving wildly off balance, somebody who I have not seen in a long while yet somebody I have more in common with, than I first realise. This third person's obvious joy and laughter, apparent awkwardness on uneven surfaces, and willingness to give things a red hot go, is rising above all personal expectations, as well as rising from the now boiling black surface of the trampoline, steadying himself mid-air then landing with some degree of control.

I had hooked the child within. I am invincible, courageous, and taking on the challenge of leaping higher and higher, causing Lincoln to lose his rhythm and plunge him into the hidden energy that my excited movement is creating on the surface of the trampoline mat. We laugh out loud, we call on each other to do a better jump, a better knee bounce, a somersault, a bottom bounce. Lincoln becomes obsessed with the word 'bottom', repeating it and laughing, only to crash uncontrollably onto the mat's surface.

“Ball, Poppy, ball,” Lincoln calls, and giving directions that only the mother of her own infant can decipher, the blue and white ball, not the red one or the tennis balls, is thrown over the top of the safety net and onto the trampoline surface. Gathering up the loose ball and under the direction of Lincoln, the game of kicking the ball starts. Nothing is off limits, kicking the ball high, low, soft, or fast and after some good running kicks I find myself searching for support from the net while catching my breath. Lincoln signals that it is time to change.

Propelling himself vertically, Lincoln pushes himself and the ball towards a basketball ring which is fixed to the inside of the netting. Repeatedly, falling back to the jelly like surface where his body wobbles until encouraged to repeat his jump. The laughter and fun soon reaches fever pitch as I, taking full advantage of my size and shape, launch myself and the ball towards the basketball ring. I feel the power surge through my legs, I sense the reward before the ball enters the ring, my efforts to propel myself are recognised as I grow taller and taller, then slam dunk the ball through the hoop.

The cheering is palpable and as this moment ‘hangs’ the next moment I have been dreading is about to happen.

Lincoln is leaping up and down and the surface of the mat is a seething black abyss into which I am returning at a rate never seen. Falling ungracefully, my legs buckle, arms outreaching as I gain some balance before rising above the mat then being slammed forward. Going onto my knees then my stomach, my face plant is complete.

Lincoln then imitates my fall from grace and with his body beside mine, the three of us, Lincoln, myself, and my inner child lay on the mat exhausted from the activities of the morning while at the same time feeling exhilarated for what our futures might bring.

So, what’s age got to do with it?

Nothing!

I Want to be a Tennis Ball not a Brick

Deborah BOYLE

Ever tried to bounce a tennis ball on the garage wall, and heard the thunking, plopping sound it makes?

Joyous, like when as a kid, your Tom Thumb super marble connected with the smaller shiny, yellow cat's eye. This is the story of discovering my true shape, that of a glorious round tennis ball, who learnt how to bounce.

I used to be a bit of a brick. Keeping still, I felt my groundedness and felt the warm earth full of inertia. I was reassured by the voices of the clone bricks all around me, my buddies that made the world safe. I lived in that red brick building for many years, but felt more claustrophobic, like an ice block trapped in a container in a freezing, unfriendly fridge. I was poised on the glacial edge of a meltdown.

Just as ice can be transformed into water, bricks can be broken by other forces. It was through these inner stressors that I escaped the solid world of brick, and fled to the freedom of 'planet tennis balls'. They were designed for the game of tennis, could often be fluoro-coloured, or seen in other luminous colours. Their felt-like material coating lets them fly through the air.

Their purpose is playing in the game of tennis, but they can be used by dogs, or anyone wanting an active life. I like tennis balls mostly because they rebound from hitting hard surfaces. The 'thwack' sound they make as they hit the ground is only the beginning. They can be unpredictable, as they do not always end up where you think they will. They are like the luminous humming birds of the sport, as they leap and dive in and out.

When I was younger I was a 'control queen'. Probably still am, but at 66, I have learnt that control is an illusion. I can set goals, such as wanting to teach myself the Arabic language, but things may intervene to prevent this. I am great at languages and always was. I can read in Latin, French, Classical Greek, and even understand some German.

I learnt a valuable lesson several years ago when I started an Arabic course at a local community college. It was filled with women in their twenties, who were engaged to young men of Arabic backgrounds. They were young and beautiful, many with flowing black hair the colour of coal. They twittered together like a flock of joyful birds. I was older by 40 years, not a fish out of water, but frozen, like an icy pool of fear.

I understood the Arabic language, with tenses, syntax, moods, declinations and conjugations. I had studied Classical Greek, so was comfortable with another alphabet. I understood diphthongs, and breathing marks with a silent 'h'. Arabic had lots of breathing in its pronunciation, and I wasn't overcome when I had to read from right to left.

But ... I forgot about the speed of my information processing. Age had pounced on me with its net of constraints. The teacher was a solicitor, and his learning style was to go around the class surprising us to get the answers. I felt mortified that I could get the right answer, but it just took me a little longer. I felt shamed and incompetent, so left after six lessons. I am not a quitter, so this was hard for me. I 'bricked out'.

A similar thing happened to me when I decided to upgrade my French conversation with Alliance Francaise a year later. I was probably the most competent and knowledgeable of the eight of us in the Level 3 class. I had been assessed in a pre-class online test. But, I had not learnt the lessons of the Arabic classes of a thousand terrors. My French group too turned into yet another 'epic fail'; my self-knowledge solidified into a lump of immobilising clay. I couldn't respond quickly enough and froze.

So, what did the tennis ball teach me? Did age have anything to do with it? Sure, but there was also the issue of context. If I was to be a joyous little tennis ball, I had to make sure I was playing in the right game. Was it a good idea for me to play in the Davis Cup after a long time inactive? Resoundingly, no. But I knew I could be effective if I chose a context that met my age, purpose and shape. I would start coffee club French conversation with other women. I was challenged but not defeated. I turned into a little ball full of pleasure.

Perhaps I was initially being brick-like in my choices. I threw myself into these classes, without thinking if I was really a good fit for them. They were not a good fit for me and my strengths. The teaching style was non-collaborative, deficit focused, rigid and linear. A brick is a small, inflexible and heavy object used in building. It must be the same as all the other bricks for the building of a structure to grow to completion, and not fall over. I could not just be 'another brick in the wall.'

Tennis balls love movement, and each is unique, with different properties. They may look the same, but we never really know their age, or the range of their bounce-ability. I want to be a tennis ball at this stage of my life. I am distinctively me, and sometimes surprise myself, as well as others. I am sillier as I get older, and like the lightness this entails.

There are different seasons in our lives and I have learnt to use my hard-won wisdom. Tennis balls have come a long way from the 12th century, when they were invented. I have travelled along a road that has taught me that not everyone needs to be zipping dangerously around the court of life at a high speed. Bricks are boring, tennis balls like me are brave and bounce through life's challenges.

You Can't Do That!

Jenelle BRANGWIN

Many years ago, four young men, all students under the age of 20, decided they wanted to build a ski lodge. They had no experience other than a love of skiing, no money, no jobs, but loads of enthusiasm and faith in themselves. They gathered together a group of other university students, formed a club, and threw themselves into finding a path to their dreams.

In those days, in the late 50s, the NSW ski fields were just being established. Work had recently finished on the Snowy Mountain Hydro Scheme, and they found there were workers' huts available for sale. Perfect, they thought, we'll buy one and have it transported on to a site in Perisher.

'You can't do that!' they were told, when they approached the National Parks for permission. And so, they began to learn of the world of regulations and obstructions.

You have no money, no equity, no experience and above all you're too young, they were constantly told.

Nevertheless, they offered honorary memberships to keen young lawyers and architects anxious to make their mark, acquired a site, a design for a lodge, and all they needed was the finance to build it.

You can imagine the bank's response! But, keen and determined, they argued that age should not be a deterrent, rather in this case it should be seen as a bonus as they would all graduate into well-paying jobs. In those days finding a job was never difficult and they would be well able to finance a loan. They also assured the manager that every one of the 200 members would open a savings account with the bank. Their enthusiasm eventually wore the bank manager down; that and the brilliant bit of advertising for the bank that one of the four came up with.

They built their lodge, paid it off in a few years, then built another at Thredbo.

Too young?

Many years later, in their first year of retirement, two of the original four and their wives, kindred spirits from those early days of adventure, decided to drive two kombis from Pakistan, across the eastern edge of the Himalayas, through the mountainous countries of all the Stans, those Central Asian Republics that had just thrown off the yoke of Soviet governance, then through the deserts of Iran and Turkey and across Europe to London. They wanted to follow the ancient Silk Road and immerse themselves in the history of the Great Game as fought out by England and Russia in the 19th century.

You can't do that! You're mad, it's dangerous, you're too old!

Maybe they were a little mad, it certainly could be dangerous. But too old? What did age have to do with it?

And so began a year of planning and research. They would not be able to cross the Himalayas until the snows had melted enough to open the road. As they would be passing through the eastern reaches of China they had to organise months in advance; to be met by a compulsory Chinese guide at a given time on a given day on top of one of the highest and most remote mountain passes in the world. But they also had to allow enough time to be through the Iranian deserts before the summer heat made travel impossible. There were an overwhelming number of variables to consider.

Having first shipped the kombis to India, they flew out to meet them, leaving behind the refrains they had come to know so well.

They eased their way into the chaos of sub-continental traffic to begin a 20,000 km journey over some of the worst roads in some of the most inhospitable regions of the world, often traversing landslides and glaciers. Crossing borders from one country to another became logistical nightmares and bribery a way of life. Camping everywhere but in the large towns, they had incredible adventures, some narrow escapes, saw some of the most spectacular scenery in the world, immersed themselves in the brilliance of the Islamic culture, and in these most inhospitable of regions were offered the warmest of hospitality. After five months they arrived in London, tired by the driving, yet exhilarated and liberated by it. They had achieved their goal; one that many had regarded as being foolhardy for 60 year olds.

Two days after they arrived back in Sydney, two planes crashed into the World Towers. No-one would be driving those roads in Central Asia for a long time.

Another twenty years passed, and one of those four young men, who was also one of the kombi drivers, and now an 81-year-old grandfather, is dusting off his skis and planning his next skiing trip, along with another member of the original four. In the coming months, they'll be heading back to Perisher, to stay in the Lodge they were told they were too young to build. They're no longer interested in challenging the mountain, just enjoying the experience of exhilaration and pleasure that simply cruising down the slopes can bring.

You can guess what many people are saying to them!

You can't do that! You're too old!

Clowning Around

Colette BRESNAHAN

Today my luck nearly ran out.

Again.

Trying to be funny. Instead of being smart.

'When will I ever learn? When will I ever learn?'

The old songs' words repeatedly expressed themselves in my limited vocal repertoire.

I relived the detailed events. Humbled. Chastened.

Returning to last Saturday fortnight, my mobile phone rang. My friend Bev asked me a big favour.

"Katie, I'm giving a surprise 70th birthday party. Was wondering if you could come ... make it a real fun time."

"Just a sec!"

Where are my glasses? Hearing aids? Pen? Calendar? Memory at 85 years young? I just have to get my necessities. All on the kitchen bench!

"Ready."

I scribbled down her reply, agreed, rang off, found a comfortable chair and started to wrack my brain. Funny, silly, crazy, stupid, juvenile, whirring cogs. Settled on funny.

"Bring on the Clowns." Mental recurring words from another song pushed forward a visual picture; colourful clown suit called for with gloves, cap, pointed shoes. Appropriate make-up. Mr. Google to be consulted.

Found a nearby Party Hire shop and entered into a dimly lit interior with small ceiling lights showing characteristic replicas of long forgotten witches, pirates, fairies.

"I'm looking to buy a clown outfit with accessories. I also need make-up."

The helpful owner nodded, placed before me a brilliant-designed red, blue, green, black and purple nylon one piece suit with white frilled collar, matching pom-pom hat and white, black, red and blue face paints.

Driving home with great satisfaction despite a lighter purse, I could hardly wait to find Mr. Google's instructions on face painting.

Looked easy. Fortunately when the party morning arrived I decided to change my facial features early before getting dressed. Just as well. The right side of my wrinkled face took to my amateur artistic copying quite well, but even using a magnifying mirror in my left hand I was at odds painting the opposite side. Seem to have more creases, excessive 'train tracks', as I heard an elderly person's face lines described by someone a few years ago on the radio.

After numerous frustrating attempts the opposing similar reflections melded into one. Dressed. Looking into my full length mirror I was pleased.

Time to switch my self-conditioner into Fun Mode.

Duly accomplished and driving slowly I noticed cars in front slowing down.

A uniformed figure, arm extended motioned me to the side into a barricaded space. I stopped as requested, smiled, waited for a reaction, raised my voice half an octave and announced "Good Morning Officer, I'm Bozo, the clown!"

"Yes, and I'm Superman. Licence?"

He did not return my smile but I knew he had a breathalyser job to do for drivers' safety.

Nevertheless, reaching for my purse I continued striving for more attention by showing my licence then increasing my voice pitch a couple of notes higher and singing his request by counting to 10.

"Un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq ..." That was as far as I got before being suddenly stopped by a small bag being handed to me through the opened window. My fun mode plummeted. This was the real world.

"BLOW ..."

Sheepishly, I nodded my head, did as I was told. The white face paint covered my embarrassing redness and surge of anxiety. Am I really deteriorating into childish behaviour? The officer looked pityingly at me, gave me a warning and waved me on. My marbles had gone into the wrong compartments.

With blurring eyes, the shade of the trees beckoned from the flat pebbled roadside.

Left blinker on and carefully steering to a quiet vacant area I stopped before tears hampered my vision.

Gently I hugged myself. No good questioning. Just be. Allow myself to be calm. Self-control. Removing my hearing aids allowed me to blot out any traffic noise as I reclaimed my peace. Able to continue and arriving at Bev's home was an accomplishment in itself. But when she opened the door and saw her smiling face I lost the resolve of my role.

"What's wrong? What's happened?"

She gave me a big hug which completely broke my intention of resuming my expected character.

"I got a warning!"

"What do you mean?"

"The police gave me a warning!"

"What? For speeding?"

"No."

She took me by the hand leading me into the kitchen. No one had arrived yet she told me. "I'll make you a cuppa."

Recounting the whole story and shedding some more tears I sipped the warm tea with gratitude.

"You look tremendous. We are going to have fun aren't we?"

"Yes. I'm feeling slightly better. Nearly ready to go. Has my makeup run?"

Answering in the negative she twirled me around and told me I looked fantastic.

With my Spirit encouragingly renewed, although forgetting my hearing aids, I readied myself for my imaginative acting part as the doorbell rang for the opening lines. I am the Clown. The Entertainer. The Stimulus for Laughter.

"Hi I'm Bozo the Clown. Come on in. What's your name?"

"Ann."

"Pleased to see you Jan."

"No. Ann."

"Oh, Ann. Sorry. Forgot my ears. And who is this with you?"

"John my husband."

"Hi Don. Hope you have a great time."

And so the comical impromptu repartee continued throughout the party. My unrehearsed lines criss-crossed conversations mixing the real with the unreal to everyone's amusement. By the time I got home I was emotionally and physically drained. My favourite recliner beckoned. The mobile interrupted my reverie which did not please me until I heard Bev's voice loud and clear.

"You were FABULOUS! Everyone enjoyed themselves and said the same. Thank you so much. You are a great friend."

"Thanks a lot my great hostess with the mostest. Bye."

I slowly clicked the small mobile button to Off bringing my day to a contented closure.



The Ride of My Life

Sue BROWN

Today is my birthday. I am eighty years old. When I first wake and realise what today is, I am a little apprehensive. What does this mean? Am I finally 'Old'? Whatever that is. But the overriding thought is 'how did I get here'? My memories are so vivid it seems like things only happened yesterday, but I know some of them happened over half a century ago.

My family has decided to give me a ride in a hot air balloon for my birthday. That's not something you give 'old' people, is it? So they mustn't think that I'm old. That's nice. I'm really looking forward to it, it's something I've wanted to do all my life.

So three generations of my family have risen at the crack of dawn and headed out to meet our exciting new day. We are in the country, and it is early morning and it is cold and quiet and peaceful. Well that is, until the balloons start filling up with a loud roar. Like a baby crying as it arrives, these balloons cry out as they inflate and come alive, changing into something awesome.

We scramble into the baskets (I do need a little help, but my new knees make this much easier) and lift off, greeting the sunrise. How magical, to be drifting silently across the landscape, still dewy from the morning. Everything looks so pristine, so new (very clear thanks to my cataract surgery). I don't want to take my eyes off the scene that is unfolding beneath me. But my mind wanders.

I think about my life. I have lived an ordinary life, I have lived a fortunate life. I am grateful, I am thankful. We sail through the sky, exposing ever-changing scenery, serenely one minute, then with a whoosh, as the gas fills the balloon. I have drifted through life, just like this balloon, with my ride being mostly peaceful but with a few little bumps along the way. As I marvel at each new scene on my trip,

I also marvel at the scenes from my life. I think about my childhood, a time when life was simple and my curiosity was aroused for the first time. I wanted to know everything about everything. I still do.

My teenage years were during an exciting era when women and girls could do anything. We had choices our mothers could never have anticipated. But we never imagined what the world would be like in the future. The freedoms and opportunities that are available today are amazing. Growing up in that time shaped me in a way that is very different to how young women of today are being shaped.

In my twenties, I was a newly married wife and mother and this was probably the most defining point in my life. Becoming a parent is both exciting and terrifying. At the same time, there is an overwhelming sense of love and the heavy onus of responsibility. And nobody ever really knows how to be a parent, there may be lots of books and advice, but there is no definitive answer. We fly by the seat of our pants and hope that it will work out alright in the end.

In my thirties and forties, I became a mature age student and saw myself back in the work force. I spent this time building my career and really growing as a person. I had finally worked out who I was. My fifties saw my children turn into amazing, responsible and caring adults. So I must have done something right.

In my sixties and seventies, I retired from paid work, travelled the world and undertook some inspiring volunteer work. But this was also when I became the 'older generation', losing my parents and my husband.

This balloon ride has been an eye opener for me. I've seen the world in a very different way today. And that's true about life, we see the world in a different way every day. I'm here in this basket, in this beautiful environment with my daughter and granddaughter. They are experiencing the same ride as me, they are seeing the same scenery. But that's not really true, they are living through this experience within their own eyes and their own ages. They are seeing and feeling very different things to me.

So, now I am 80 and the person inside me still wonders how I got here and who I am. Wasn't it only yesterday that I was a teenager with my whole life in front of me? So what does this mean? What has age got to do with it? I certainly don't see the world today in the same way as I did then. I don't see the world today in the same way as I did at any other time of my life.

And I realise that age has got everything to do with it. As I reflect back on my life, I realise that who I am today has been shaped by all these events, all these times and all the people I have met. I am the person that I am today because of my life experiences. I haven't lost those parts of me that grew out of all my other ages. I've brought them along with me. All those people are part of me. Now I am all these people.

My balloon ride comes to an end, with a gentle bump. We clamber out, full of wonder and joy at what we have just experienced. I have really enjoyed the trip. I have also enjoyed the opportunity to reflect on my life and to think about who I am. I am full of wonder and joy at what I have experienced throughout my life. My 80 year old self is at peace with the world and with myself. And that has come with age. But I am not 'old', I am just me.

Let Creativity Flow

Sandra BRUNET

"If only I was your age and know what I know now." Mum would look at me wistfully when I was young and give me her generous smile.

"What would you do differently, Mum?" I asked one day. She sighed and swept up crumbs from under the kitchen table.

"I'd have finished my education." I knew Mum had worked as a dental nurse after she left school until the unwelcome advances of the middle-aged, married dentist resulted in her quitting her job. She then trained and worked as a dressmaker for Lamsdale Sisters, Pty Ltd. No men to worry her in that line of work but the money was meagre.

"What would you have studied?"

She stopped sweeping and picked up the dustpan. "I'd loved to have studied art but..." she shrugged.

I smiled, remembering. When I was little, she often did pencil drawings of trees giving them weird faces and wizened features.

"You still could. There are correspondence courses in art. Why don't you enrol?"

She snorted. "Too late now. I'm far too old."

"No Mum, you're never too old. I can help you enrol if you want me to."

"I'll think about it." Her smile was sad, resigned. I knew she wouldn't.

I'd always assumed she was happy as a wife, mother and housekeeper. She seldom complained. I suppose when you're a kid, mums are mums and that's that. As she did housework, she sang

songs from musicals or light opera. I thought she was happy, that all was right with her world. As I grew, her obsession with education for girls, for me anyway, and her regret at not having finished her education suggested that in a corner of Mum's heart there was a void.

When I was half-way through secondary school, I wanted to leave and to study commercial art in Brisbane. Mum put her foot down. "You must finish your secondary schooling, Sally. You must."

"Why should I, Mum? There are good jobs for commercial artists." I kicked a pebble across the path.

At the time she was hosing down the timber deck of our farmhouse. She was using the hard-bristled broom as a scrubbing brush. It was a hot summer day and her quick squirt of water in my direction was welcome.

She paused to consider my question. "You never know what the future holds. Your husband might get run over by a bus."

"I don't intend getting married."

She snorted. "When Mr Right comes along, you'll change your mind."

"If he ends up under a bus, he'll be Mr Wrong, won't he?"

The image of anyone under a bus was chilling. She hadn't said a London bus. Why would she when we lived in south-east Queensland? But the immediate image of a badly squashed young man I'd so far never met, under the wheels of a large red, two decker London bus, silenced me.

I knew where this was coming from. Mum's first husband, the father of my half-brother, John, had died when John was a toddler. Mum was in her early twenties. Three years later she married my father. If she had been educated, maybe an art teacher, would she have opted to be an independent, single mother?

I didn't ask. I doubted she would have answered honestly if she thought her answer suggested a preference for the nonexistence of the four of us children she'd had with our father. I felt uncomfortable so didn't push for an answer.

Dad was a hard-working, steady-living, successful farmer with a great sense of humour. He had high expectations for my brothers that caused arguments sometimes. Dad assumed I'd work in a bank before marrying some nice boy. Had he forgotten how much I'd hated maths?

Mum liked to boast to friends about his considerate ways. Each morning she enjoyed a cup of tea in bed before starting her day. He cooked his own breakfast if making an early start, and at night if I were in bed, he'd wipe the dishes. Sometimes he'd help vacuum the floors. When they were young, he'd gladly mind my older siblings and cousins while Mum and Dad's sister went to the local balls. She made him sound like Mr Perfect of the 1950s.

Even so, I wanted to ask: "Why did you marry Dad, if you wanted to have a career and stay single?" The unstated question of course was, "Didn't you want us four kids?" But in my heart, I knew that wasn't true. Mum wasn't one to whinge about the path not taken.

When it came to my education, Mum got her way. I was and am pleased she convinced me to finish school. In fact, I've always loved learning and enjoyed my senior school years. After matriculating I went to university and became an English teacher. Mum was pleased. The image of that red double-decker bus, determined to run down young husbands, faded. My modest career qualifications had flattened it.

I tried to get Mum to do a community art course when she and Dad retired to Mermaid Beach. I suggested we both enrol and go along over the summer vacation.

She smiled. "It's probably too late now."

"Mum, you've always loved sketching and painting. What's age got to do with it?"

"What indeed," she replied. We sipped our tea. Cup clinking against saucer. A magpie trilled. "One of our neighbours, Donna, is an artist," she said. "One day I showed her some of my sketches."

"What did she say?" I put my cup and saucer down.

"Nothing. She smirked and sniffed loudly but said nothing."

"Well, show her. Enrol. Paint. Don't let her put you down. Age has got nothing to do with your creativity."

She gave me her wide smile. Her big brown eyes were twinkling. "Hmm. Maybe I will." She smiled at me and laughed. "No maybe about it. I will."

The Cycle of Life

Dr Anthony BURNS

A true story

In my post pubescent years, I was a keen board rider. I lived for our surf safaris, taking the slow crawl up the coast, as far as the shack town of Noosa. There were 5 of us in our gang, one of whom was Mr Jones. Yes, 'Mr Jones' was his real name. He was an Industrial Designer. We always referred to him reverently, as 'Mr' rather than Frank. We thought it mind boggling that a 50 year old guy could actually surf. On one trip, just the two of us headed North in my, 1959 FC hotted Holden. Mr Jones didn't mind being a kid.

Now I'm 2 decades older than Frank was. Older folk doing what kids do, is no longer so mind boggling for me. I've been a keen surf windsurfer; Hobie sailor; road roller blader; road cyclist; mountain biker; surf skier; spearo; tennis and soccer player; hang glider pilot; bushwalker; wilderness telemark skier, snow camper and established a ski school. Rock climbing is now my main sport. I started at 48 and after 24 years, I joke that my aim is to maintain the plateau. I still climb better than most 20 year olds, although my wife now has a slight edge on me.

Abuse, alcohol, gambling and poverty created a tough childhood for me. My defence as a child was to build emotional walls around myself. If no one could penetrate, no one could hurt me. This was not the ideal formula for good relationships later in life. I was the tough guy.

I was born a stammerer. My constant fear in school was to have the finger pointed at me and being asked to read. I was unable to speak a single line. The whole class would be in uproar and even the teacher would be laughing. I cannot describe the excruciating embarrassment at not being able to say my name. I developed my own techniques to overcome my affliction. I can now even stop hiccoughs, on the hiccough, through my relaxation techniques. I was the only person in my Corrosion Technology class in my 2nd year Chemical Engineering to volunteer to give the first mandatory presentation. It went perfectly. I could now speak. There was nothing that could hold back the tough guy.

I started a software company, having never touched a computer. I taught myself. My company has been hugely successful. Hundreds of major companies around the world, including Microsoft, have bought my software. I have recently released the world's first e-learning, built using Interactive 3D and Augmented Reality. It is light years ahead of what the kids in other companies churn out. The word 'retirement' does not compute for me.

I exercise at least 2 hours daily. I don't drink alcohol. I don't drink coffee or tea. I eat lots of salads, with fish, meat or chicken.

Emotional health is as important as physical health. At around 50, I had a couple of friends say 'you need help'. As a scientific experiment, I did a personal development course. After many more and much volunteer work, it was obvious to me that I had needed help. It changed me. No longer was I the tough guy, although I could be tough when needed. My heart had been opened. Without it, I could not possibly be in the wonderful marriage that I have today.

Keeping super fit and healthy makes one ageless. My mind is sharper now than it was when I was awarded my doctorate. Wisdom of years adds greatly to intellect. A great example is Ashkin winning the Nobel Prize for Physics, when he was 96. Physical injuries are inevitable as one ages but as long as one nurses them well, the body can also be effective for many years. I know it will come but I have yet to see the signs of the slippery slide downhill.

I've had a colourful life with about 15 introductions to the grim reaper. A few years hang gliding, almost brought me to a messy end on a couple of occasions. We learned aeronautics by trial and lethal error. I was lucky to survive a failed night time rescue mission, in the Snowies, with a blizzard approaching. An escape from a disastrous Lilo trip down the Cox River, led to climbing a waterfall in Galong box canyon. We had no ropes. It was as though an unseen hand from heaven saved me. However, scariest of all was losing a chunk of chest, but surviving cancer.

Three of my past girlfriends were not so lucky. It is ironic that all three had said I was too old for them. In my single years, most women were so fixated on having a partner who was no more than 5 years older. So ridiculous. None of these women would have dreamed that I would outlive them by decades. So much for being too old.

My now wife had no such delusions about age. A fortune teller had told her that she would meet a much older man. 31 years' age difference has not caused the slightest issue. We have had 16 years of bliss so far. The ultimate gift has been our gorgeous, happy, loving, affectionate and absolutely brilliant 11 year old son.

I cannot express the love that I have for my wife and child. I live vicariously through my son. Seeing him standing on a surfboard for the first time was even more of a thrill than it was for me more than half a century ago. His many academic achievements mean more to me than mine. I *feel* what he feels. Time disappears with my son.

I have done so many things in life, my only wish is to see the full cycle of life and to hold my son's child. While age has meant nothing to me, hopefully it doesn't take my son as long as it took me to meet the woman of my dreams.

Intrepid Hiker

Eric BURROWS

I was nearing the end of a hike at Binna Burra National Park when I saw another hiker on a track joining the one that I was on. We met and continued walking and talking towards the car park. She was a young woman who told me of the multi-day hikes that she had done, Alice Springs, Tasmania, the Thorsborne Trail on Hinchinbrook Island. As we got to the car park she said, "You should do the Thorsborne Trail", ignoring the fact that I was about twice her age. She pulled on her crash hat, climbed onto her bloody great motorcycle and rode off into the gloom and drizzle.

She had planted seeds in my brain, I found myself on the Internet looking at the Queensland Parks web site. More and more I was getting information on the Thorsborne trail. Only 40 people were allowed on the island at any one time together with a maximum group size of five. Four days was the suggested minimum time for the hike, five days was suggested to allow time for unforeseen events. The guide to the Trail was for going from North to South, I thought that going from South to North would be better so I spent a long time rewriting the guide to read in the opposite direction.

By now it became apparent that doing this hike had become inevitable, so I looked up the weather history and found that July was probably the driest month, so I booked five days in July to do it.

I was reasonably fit being used to doing up to 15 km bushwalks, but I wasn't sure about this new challenge. So each weekend I would load my back pack with cans and packets to build up the weight and climb some local mountain. Interestingly I met another man several times who was doing the same thing but was aiming at New Zealand not a local trail.

Planning became an essential, nothing could be left on the island so it was better to take packet food rather than cans as empty packets are easier to carry. I bought a lighter sleeping bag together with a silk liner, at least I would be comfortable in my sleep. A small one burner stove would be my cooker. I booked a motel room to go to before starting the trek and posted a set of clean clothes to a motel at the end, I thought that it would be better doing that rather than carrying clean clothes for five days, of course they may not have stayed clean.

I booked a seat on the tilt train to get to Ingham because I thought that it would be interesting to use it. On the day a friend drove me to the station, here I had my first doubts of what I was about to do. When the railway man picked up my pack he stuck a label on it saying 'heavy, two to lift'. The tilt train was a disappointment, I could see its speed on an information screen which showed that it was not much faster than a century ago. However the seat was comfortable and the meals satisfactory, so it wasn't a bad trip.

I got off the train at Ingham, found my motel and had a good look at my pack. I checked everything in it, I had already realised that I was carrying things that would not be needed. The surplus was put into bags and posted to myself, much easier than carrying them. I had a day to spare before taking the ferry to the island, this was used to have a look around the town.

The ferry collected me at 10.30 together with half a dozen others, I was the only one doing the complete walk, the others were staying just one day. We were dropped off at a typical tropical sandy beach and walked along it for about 45 minutes before heading into the trees and starting climbing. The camp site had a nice rock pool which we could dangle our tired feet in.

The next day's hike was about 7.5 km which was supposed to take 4.5 hours. It took me one hour to do the first kilometre as the track was a steep dry creek bed which in places I had to climb on hands and knees. After another km I started to have doubts about my ability, I could go back which would take a couple of days, or I could go on which would take a couple of days. After looking at all of the options I felt that I had invested so much time and effort in planning this trip that it would be foolish to give up that easily. So the die was cast, I would be going to hike the whole trail.

The rest of the trail varied from easy to difficult. Climbing down a knotted rope bolted to a very large boulder or looking across a muddy swamp, seeing the yellow trail marker, and realising that walking through the swamp was the only way across. These were just a couple of the challenges.

Getting to the campsite at Zoe Bay and seeing signs warning of crocodiles was a bit disconcerting but I was so tired that I just slept in my tent and hoped that the crocodiles were not hungry. After four days I reached the end of the walk and took the ferry, first to the Eco lodge, and then onto Cardwell. A meal at the lodge was very welcome.

So that is how I celebrated my 76th birthday. I think that it is important not to let age be your excuse for not doing something. You can say that you are too tired, too frightened, not fit enough, but don't say that you are too old.

A Two Track Mind

Jeanette CAMPBELL

“Where’s that train going Mum?”

We lived in Regent Street, Regent’s Park. Steam locomotives billowed smoke as they made their way through the railway cutting behind our long block, proceeding along the main southern line. Mum had memorised the timetable so that she could answer my brother as best she could.

“That train’s going to Cootamundra; to Albury; to Temora.” An exciting addition, the Intercapital Daylight was added to the fleet in March 1956, and that train went all the way to Melbourne!

“Mum, can I go on the train with Dad this afternoon?”

“I suppose so, as far as Lidcombe, then come straight back. Don’t dilly-dally.” Dad was a labourer at Goodyear Tyre and Rubber Company at Camellia. The factory later gave way to the spread of suburbia.

Red rattlers, the iconic electric trains plied their way across the suburbs.

There was little time to savour the new train to Melbourne, as the family left Regent’s Park for a farm near Young four months later. Big brother, aged 11, left his railway mecca behind.

But exciting adventures were in store. Now the family could experience country trains, not just view them from afar. Every summer we travelled to Sydney to spend a week or so with Mum’s sister, not far from Strathfield Station.

The steam locomotive hissed into Young Railway Station as we made our way onto the platform, luggage in hand. The porter stacked each bag onto a trolley, ready for loading into the guard’s van, booked through to Strathfield. Invariably a cattle truck would be hitched behind the locomotive, steers pounding and snorting. One or two passenger carriages came next, followed by a freight wagon and then the guard’s van. Mixed trains were the order of the day on the branch lines.

The passenger carriages were divided into compartments, a corridor down the side. Black and white photos looked down from above the seats – country scenes of NSW. Clicking up the windows was our first ‘must-do’, unperturbed by the pervading odour of cattle.

Shortly after we were settled, there was a shudder and a jolt as the train pulled out of the station. One of many such shudders and jolts as it crept towards Harden, the junction with the Main Line. The track wound past the saleyards and then Chinaman’s Dam of Young’s notorious gold mining days. Rising up ahead was the engine’s greatest challenge. The funnel belched black smoke and soot as the pistons pumped, the locomotive straining to drag its carriages to the top of Pitstone Hill. ‘I think I can ... I think I can’. We had learnt to keep our faces away from the open window. Soot in the eye was very painful!

At last the train steamed into Harden Station, chuffing and juddering until it stopped with a thud. We had made it!

What a contrast awaited. The Riverina Express glided into the station – air-conditioned, reserved seats, a buffet car. Paradise! There were no opening windows, but a wide ledge and a table which attached to the inside wall of the carriage. Mum always had Fantaes and Columbines tucked in her bag – and a Women’s Weekly to browse along the way.

“Let’s go and have lunch!”

We made our way through to the buffet car, negotiating the rattling connection plates between each carriage. Toasted ham sandwiches, squashed flat in a huge press, were such a treat, served on a white plate with the red NSWGR insignia. There were real milkshakes in metal containers, with paper straws. Or there were Railway Pies, complete with the gristly bits.

For five or so hours we wended our way through farmland and town, across bridges and culverts, alongside factories and forests. As dusk was turning to night we slid into Strathfield Station. Skipping down the ramp and through the underpass was a special delight.

We always looked forward to our annual trip, never tiring of the routine or the length of the journey. These experiences instilled my love of trains and were the catalyst for travelling the Great Railway Journeys of Australia.

But my brother’s passion continued on a much deeper level. Heritage excursions at every opportunity; interviewing station masters from long since abandoned lines; delving into dusty documents; pouring over ancient photographs; recording history for future generations.

“Heh, Sis, you know what I’ve just found out?”

Two of our great great uncles, who were brothers, were killed while working as fettlers (in 1927 and 1941), each hit by a train – in the wrong place at the wrong time. Their names are now immortalised at the Werris Creek Memorial, along with hundreds of other names. All killed in the line of duty, all killed while keeping the trains running, keeping the country moving.

Another great great uncle, another brother, was earlier killed near Moss Vale, following the collision of the Temora Mail with a goods train in 1914. He was returning from Sydney after passing the Police Force entrance exam. Celebration had catapulted into calamity.

Unearthing these snippets helped us to appreciate our family history.

“I’d like to take a photo of the ballast-top bridge in Thornhill Street. It’ll be declared unsafe soon and pulled down”.

It was Easter this year. We were back at Young to celebrate the centenary of the primary school we had attended from 1956 – 1963. For my brother, exploring railway remnants in country towns was mandatory.

“Brother, you have such a one-track mind!”

“No Sis, I have a two-track mind with sleepers in between.”

Flat Rock Will Always be My Home

Maree GARDNER CHAPMAN

Flat Rock State Forest, inland from Milton NSW, was a small timber mill community. My grandmother, the mill owner's wife, her elderly relative, my aunt Doris, and I were the only females in the community of timber cutters. To grow up surrounded by nature, the freedom to wander and explore and a peaceful family home, built into me an appreciation for this place. It is this indelible impression that always draws me back.

My father and grandfather were timber cutters. My mother left when I was born so Dad took me home to the modest timber cottage where his parents lived. Grandma was the only mother I have known. Being the only child in the small community, life was beautiful, free and full of wonder. But life there as a child, was solitary. Alone but not lonely. It was safe and secure with a loving industrious family. Dad and Granddad were strong, hard working men.

Feeling very nervous as my husband drove along the winding dusty road toward Flat Rock. I wondered, how I would know the place if the old cottage isn't there? I longed for things to remain as I remembered them. Fifty years had passed since I last stood on the ground where life had begun for me. This was the journey I had wanted to take all my life.

As we rounded the corner something about the place was familiar. The huge old gum tree, scribbled and oozing glistening sap was the first thing I saw. It remained proudly by the roadside and still wore the scar I once inflicted upon it with a small axe. A gift from my dad. An axe might sound like a strange thing for a dad to give his daughter of 5, but it was significant in that I worshiped my dad and wanted to be a timber cutter like him.

There was nothing remaining of the old timber cottage of a physical nature, but it was a place that was burned into my memory. Excitedly I got out. My husband stayed in the car listening to the radio while I surveyed the now vacant lot that once was my childhood home. It was long gone, but in my mind's eye I could still see the cottage. Each room and just about everything in it.

It was a hot day, the smell of the dust in the air and the sounds of the bush were so familiar. I ran my fingers through the gum tree's scar as I passed, picked off a piece of sap. Placed it on my tongue. It tasted just like it used to.

As a small child a good part of my day was spent sitting in this dirt playing with patty tins and bugs. Or hiding under the house near the tank, daydreaming the time away.

I squatted in the powdery dirt once more. Rubbing it between my fingers I watched it stream like gold dust as I raised my hand to the sun. It was not just any old dirt. It's my dirt!

I sat crossed legged on the ground, tears streaming down my face, flushed by the hot sun, yearning for one last look at the cottage. One last glimpse of home. While there was no physical evidence of that home, there was always a way to get back there.

A few nights before our trip I heard the call of a Boobook owl. It reminded me of watching the moon through the lace curtains, and hearing the owl's comforting call.

I also had a fascination with sparrows. So dad produced a cardboard box with holes in the top, propped it up with a stick and attached a long piece of twine. He taught me to catch sparrows under the box. They would come to eat the small pieces of bread that we put underneath. I would pull the twine causing the box to drop, capturing the sparrows. When I was finished studying them through the holes in the box, I always released them.

There were other memories that came trickling back to me that day. I remembered sucking on Sarsaparilla leaves, threading daisy chains, making wishes as I blew dandelion fluff into the air, the perfume of wild freesias and the song of the magpie and crow. What a life for a child.

Suddenly I remembered the old car dumped in the bush opposite the cottage all those years ago. Dad had allowed me to play in it. Was there anything left to salvage? Hidden in the grassy bank was a spark plug, and a ring of metal now brown with rust. Keepsakes, evidence of my childhood. Gathering them up, I ambled slowly back to the car, deep in thought. We left Flat Rock and headed back to Milton with my treasures still clasped in my hand?

It's only with age do memories draw life in and around us, making sense of where we've been and who we are. The trick is to sift out the memories that really matter. And only set up camp with memories that sustain and enrich us.

Flat Rock today? Well you wouldn't know it once housed a community and a timber mill. It did and I was a part of it. History has not regarded Flat Rock significant enough to make a fuss of it. However, I will make up for that.

The Hollow Hotel

Susan COOTES

I reclined in the chair soaking up the unusual warmth of a winter's day. I tried to read my book, but my attention was drawn to a large craggy tree that stretched to the sky like a grey skeleton that had outlived its days of usefulness. Was it only good for firewood?

At first glance, it appeared lifeless, aged and dormant but as I watched, sulphur-crested cockatoos landed like aerial gymnasts on its spindly branches. Branches that looked like they would break with the slightest weight, yet they offered adequate support for these lightweight feathered frames. To them it was home. A high place of security. A place to raise their young.

Yes, the tree was void of leaves, but its broken branches now created nests for the future.

As the day progressed different birds visited this hollow hotel. At one stage the range of bright colours resembled a decorated Christmas tree with living baubles. Then as night approached the bright colours gave way to sophisticated black and white magpies to display a night attire of magical elegance.

All these birds knew what I had failed to see in this grey sculpture. Where I, at first, saw something that had outlived its usefulness, to them and the other creatures that now called it home, it was still vitally useful. They used it to rest, to talk, to sing, to survey and to house their young.

As I watched these transformations my phone made that familiar beep of an incoming message. My friend who had just started cancer treatment messaged to say that her hair had started to fall out. Her sadness and concern were evident in her text. This inevitable progression of cancer versus treatment brought a question of self-worth.

I needed to tell her of this tall sentinel of hope.

Yes, it had lost its green canopy, but it was still vibrant, still vitally useful and definitely still beautiful. Now it was a beauty not defined by mere outward appearance but by a more powerful inner beauty.

So, I reminded her that she, like this tree was going to be with us for a long time. More useful than ever. More vibrant. And quite definitely more powerfully beautiful.



Good Wolf, Bad Wolf

Franklyn COWELL

More than sixty years ago Tomasz Wozniak flattened me on my back. A split lip and a chipped tooth were no match for the humiliation I had felt that afternoon as Wozniak's cronies cheered him on to 'finish' me off as I lay sprawled on the playground of our local high school. We were thirteen at the time, but Wozniak – or Big Tom – as he was called by his hangers-on, was even at that age a mountain of a man with fists the size of dinner plates.

This bully took absolute pleasure in belting us up, and since the school authorities seemed reluctant to act, I approached my Uncle Dave for help. He had boxed at school and even had a few trophies collected along the way.

Unfortunately, Uncle Dave's efforts counted for naught, for on that fateful afternoon when I stood up to Big Tom, my blows were deflected with derision bordering on boredom before he cut loose with a single punch that rattled every bone in my body.

Inexplicably, Big Tom left our school at the end of term, and although I hadn't seen him again, for many years his face graced the sports pages of newspapers and magazines as he gained a notoriety of sorts in the boxing world. News also trickled through our Old Boys' network of sightings that had taken place over the decades.

And suddenly, here he was, in the flesh, weaving through the lunchtime crowd, crossing the busy street heading in my direction. I was absolutely certain it was Big Tom, and seeing him up close once more fed into my primal desire for revenge. This time, I'd bring up the incident, make him grovel, then extract that long overdue apology.

"Big Tom," I uttered as he brushed past my shoulder. He stopped dead in his tracks, half turning towards me. I could see him struggling to place me, brows furrowed as he studied my face. I eased his scrutiny by declaring, "Les Molloy. St Michael's. Class of '58."

There was a glimmer of recognition as he shook his head, and I knew he was still trying to line me up as he mentally excavated peoples and events that had long been relegated to the dim recesses of his memory.

"I remember now," he nodded at length, his voice sounding gravelly and surprisingly soft. "It's been a lo-o-ng time."

"Yes," I agreed. "I've read articles about you from time to time in the sports pages. But that, too, was many years ago. So, how have you been?"

"You don't want to know!"

"Try me." If I had hoped for an apology, it was not forthcoming.

He paused, as if in thought, searching for the right word or phrase. "Do you remember Mr. Baker, our Scripture teacher? He taught us once about 'Good Wolf, Bad Wolf'."

I knew it well, but why bring it up now?

The story was about an old Cherokee Chief who tried to impart a valuable lesson to his grandson concerning good and evil, stating that each of us have a good and bad wolf within us that are constantly at war with each other. And when the grandson asks, 'Which one wins?' the old Chief wisely answers, 'The one you feed'.

"I was the bad wolf, Les." Big Tom looked forlorn, vulnerable, the hurt in his eyes and pain in his voice an unqualified substitute for that unspoken apology. "You were the good ones, you and your mates."

Another pause, and then he blurted, "I fed that bad wolf, because I learned at a very young age to give as good as I got."

Sensing there was much more to Big Tom than any of us had actually understood, I asked if he'd care to join me for a coffee.

As his story unravelled, I realized that the thirteen-year-old boy who decked me all those years ago was himself the subject of unspeakable violence at the hands of a sadistic stepfather who was a wife-beater, inveterate gambler and cheap drunk. It appeared that all Big Tom wanted was to stand out as an individual, to be given the respect and validation he so much craved for that were denied him at home.

And his sudden departure from school?

Yes, that was unexpected, he recalled. His mother had reached a point where she could not bear the beatings any longer, so mother and son sought out crisis accommodation, skipping from town to town, living on whatever charity was offered to them. When he turned eighteen, Big Tom boxed for money and things started to improve. But he had always been a loner, more so after his mother died. He had never married and had no family of his own.

"So how are things now?" I wanted to know.

He held me in a lingering gaze, unsure whether he should take me into his confidence.

"Three months," he eventually said. "I've just been to see my oncology specialist. All I've got is three months, and that's being optimistic."

I was speechless. I could only look at him in disbelief. My feelings of hurt and revenge paled into insignificance at this shocking news. Shame enveloped me as I reprimanded myself for harbouring such bitterness towards this fractured human being all these years, for before me was not the bully I knew, but a lost and lonely thirteen-year-old boy, still desperately reaching out for acceptance.

"Big Tom," I whispered, as I covered his huge hand with mine, "You're not alone any longer. I'll speak to the boys. Your Class of '58 will not let you down."

A tear suddenly tumbled down his face and burned a hole in my hand; a single tear that sufficiently allowed the stains of a lifetime of remorse and regret to be finally washed away.

As the afternoon wore on, Big Tom grew visibly tired but smiled wryly and nodded in agreement when I remarked, "Our good wolves have eaten well today."

At What Stage Am I?

Lyn DARK

Travelling from Maitland along the Bylong Valley Way towards the region of Mudgee, I was growing more and more excited with every revolution of the car's wheels. Excited because I knew my daughter and grandchildren were making their way from Bathurst to meet me at the quaint midway country township of Rylstone.

I arrived first at the pre-arranged meeting place in the local park where the grandchildren could stretch their legs, run around, and burn off some of their pent-up energy. Picking out a suitable picnic table near the play equipment, I perched myself on the icy weather worn bench to wait for their arrival.

Looking around I noticed a thick matting of leaves lying at the base of an old tree. With the onset of the autumn cold, they had been discarded by their deciduous host and parachuted unceremoniously to the ground. A gentle breeze blew a small cluster of these leaves in my direction, I watched as they swirled around my feet.

On closer observation I realised that all the leaves were at different stages of their dying process. Some were still a beautiful, lush bottle green colour, they had only just been shed. Their supple stems had been acting as an umbilical cord, transferring nourishment from the tree to give life to the leaf, this cord now severed, releasing the infant from the bosom of its mother. Other leaves had only a tinge of beige on their edge. One was mottling browns and reds with its crisp parched rim curling back onto itself, this made the ideal place for a tiny black spider

to spin a web inside and call it home. Then there were the leaves that were completely blanched, their life ended. They now lay decaying on the cold wet ground, each leaf now offering up their final benefit to this earth, becoming compost, to feed the trees from which they fell. After a season of filtering and recycling carbon dioxide into oxygen their lifecycle was complete.

With the family now exiting their vehicle, squeals grew louder and louder as each little cherub came running towards me, smothering me with much missed hugs and kisses. After lots of catching up and a filling picnic lunch, their mother brought out a soccer ball for the youngsters to kick around and tire them so hopefully they will sleep on the return trip home. I joined in on the game, but before long my arthritic body started reminding me that I am not as young as I might think I am. "Come on Granny, chase me" is easier said than done these days.

After a wonderful day it was time for our goodbyes. With a heavy heart, I climbed into the warmth of my car and turned the heater on full blast, blocking out the chill of the afternoon wind that had gradually been creeping in. As I pull out from the car park, I notice that one solitary maple shaped leaf had fallen onto my windscreen. It was stuck to the glass by the moisture from a drizzle of earlier rain. As the car gradually picked up speed, I watched the tips of the leaf start to flicker, trying to keep holding on as tight as the dampness would allow.

The leaf was crinkled and brown, looking closer I noticed there were hints of various green speckled on its' body. It was no longer vibrant and glossy, like it would have been. Its' tiny veins are still visible, but now much needed fluid no longer pulsates through them. I began to question at what stage am I in my life? I know I am way beyond my supple, luscious green phase and even past the halfway stage. Catching my reflection in the rear- view mirror I take note of the wrinkled, blotchy skin of my face and can relate to the leaf clinging to life.

As the car picked up pace the leaf theatrically fluttered more and more, slowly sliding across the glass. It almost resembled an octopus casting its' tentacles forward, looking for another damp patch to anchor onto. Finally, it could hold on no more and had to release its grip on the windscreen. In the side mirror I watched as it fell onto the road, its life now over.

The saying "What's age got to do with it? Age is just a number," does not add up for me, my mind is making me feel I am still in my forties, but my face and body are telling the truth. Like the new shoots of the future spring leaves, I know that my grandchildren and great-grandchildren will continue the cycle of life that I have enjoyed being a part of.

It's a Keepsake, Grandma.

Julie DAVIS

"Why are you hanging onto this, Mum? Must be pretty old by now."

She turns from the stove holding up a square of quilted material, green and white gingham with a small red and white floral insert. The same red patterned piece covers the back and is bordered with the gingham. Invisibly hand-stitched. Slightly Christmassy.

"It is old in the potholder world, sweetie. Twenty-one and certainly showing its age." My grip tightens on the knife as I finish topping and tailing the beans, rinse them under the tap.

"And pretty tatty. Haven't you noticed the stuffing coming out on one side, the stitching unravelling? Not to mention the stains. Mum, really!"

I hate being patronised and having my behaviour scrutinised. Take a deep breath, I tell myself. Speak calmly and don't treat your fifty year-old daughter as a child. Besides, her comments are justified. I'm not throwing it out though, if that's what she's going to suggest. There are memories stitched in there; a foreign language; warmth and respect on a couple of levels – international, intergenerational. Connection to family. It stays until I die.

"Use that padded mitt then. The green one. Leave that quilted one on the hook, please."

"Come on Mum, it should be tossed out. Seriously."

I love her. I do. "Look, get on with it, darling. Check that roast. They'll be here soon. And make sure the veggies are crisping up."

We exchange places. I stir the gravy, check on the greens and pour the warm custard into a jug. They all love a proper roast dinner and pudding.

They've gone. I hug the warm mug, sipping chamomile tea as I stare through the upstairs window at a slice of lustrous moon poised above the escarpment. What a happy evening it was. Laughter and good natured banter. I even survived the account of 'Mum's tatty old pot holder that she won't throw out'. It was brought to the table. Passed around. Some grimaced. Bemused teenagers smiled politely.

'Hey Grandma, what's the story?' He's twenty-five, an assertive and loving communicator, but not above a little teasing.

The tale I told went something like this: 'That potholder is beyond mending, I know, and the stains won't disappear no matter what the blurb on the Preen bottle says. Stitched into it are such warm memories of my time as a volunteer driver for the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000. A few of you weren't even born then.'

Four heads nodded.

'Well, on my first day of duty in the Olympic Village with the Costa Rican Team, Ginnette, wife of their Chef de Mission, asked if I knew where to buy quilting fabric. She was to produce Christmas-themed patchwork items for her quilting group on her return to San José ... Sounds like a song, doesn't it?'

'Yeah, but get on with it Mum.'

'Right. I'd no idea where such fabric was sold and consulted a friend who helped me locate patchwork retailers and, coincidentally, quilting exhibitions.'

'On a sunny spring Saturday – oh, I'm having warm fuzzies remembering it – one of the Spanish-speaking volunteers and I took Ginnette, her husband and another official on an excursion that included shopping for quilting material while the men had a quick beer at a nearby pub. Later we visited a koala park, then drove on to Windsor for a quilting exhibition. We had a quiet lunch in Windsor Mall and they generously paid for our meal, saying how much they enjoyed this time out of the city. It truly was a great day to show off the region – all bright blue sky and sparkling air. Well away from the hype and bustle of the Games. And they were such delightful, kind-hearted people.

'You know how to tell a lo-o-ong story don't you Mum?' He says the same thing every time.

'Yes, and...'

'But wait, there's more' came a chorus of voices and gentle chuckling from around the dinner table.

I smiled. 'Yes, more. No great dramas though. You, Gemma, were due to be born around the close of the Games and the Costa Ricans were as excited as I was, waiting for news of the baby's arrival. Sure enough you arrived just before our final outing together, an evening on a yacht on Sydney Harbour. No such thing as cameras in phones then, so I had photos printed to share with them.

'We volunteers exchanged addresses with each other and with Ginnette, but letters fizzled out as we struggled with English-Spanish translations. Besides, you can't expect team officials to keep in touch with volunteers from every Olympics they attend.

'Then in late November, a small parcel with Costa Rican stamps arrived. Inside was my potholder and a white padded bib with red trim for baby Gemma, all in material bought at the fabric outlet on that memorable day back in September. The accompanying card "For the Happy Grandparents" expressed the gratitude of Ginnette and her husband for my -quote- necessary and wonderful work with the team. Muchas gracias Guillermo y Ginnette.'

'Woo-hoo Grandma.'

'Awesome, Grandma.'

'That potholder's a keepsake, Grandma. Don't get rid of it.'

'Pretty special, Mum.'

'And the bib? Still got it Gemma?'

There was an expected groan as I fetched the year 2000 photo album, then murmurs as we viewed that dear little solemn, round-faced baby wearing a slightly too-large bib.

I'm still gripping the empty mug, my mind lingering on those Olympic year events: the genuine warmth of those morning handshakes and hugs as we arrived for our volunteer duties, the shared joy of an athlete's success or glumness at loss. I feel the smile spreading on my face as my glance lingers on the moon. In a few hours it will be visible in Costa Rica.

Never mind how old that precious potholder is. It'll be hanging in the kitchen until I go. I don't have to use it. Perhaps I'll mend it, give it a gentle wash. We'll age together.

My Sister Muriel

Margarita D'HEUREUX

Muriel gripped the steering wheel. Her palms were sweating profusely. It left a wet residue along the rim. She could feel the perspiration under her armpits increase and knew this had discoloured her pink, cotton shirt. The scent of Channel No 5 hung in the air, but there was another scent that swirled. It made the hairs on her arm stand up. It was fear.

"Muriel, start the car!" a voice said.

She turned her head to the left at the young man sitting beside her. His gentle, brown, eyes were kind and for a moment she thought she saw a flash of trepidation cross his face. He had raked his fingers through his thinning, pale, brown, hair until it stood up straight like a cock's comb.

"Start the car?"

"Yes, start the car," he repeated.

"Look in the rear-view mirror and side mirrors and turn around to ensure the road is clear of motor vehicles."

She had a profound fear of driving since she had run a Stop Sign about 6 weeks ago. It wasn't her fault. She just did not see it. She had driven through the Stop sign and had missed the bus by metres. She was sure it was metres, but her instructor insisted it was centimetres. Anyway, she missed the bus and, in her panic, drove towards the gutter and landed on the grassed verge. The Instructor wrenched the door open, stumbled out of the car and collapsed onto the kerb. He clutched his chest and swore she was the worst driver he had ever had. The ambulance was called, and she spent the next two days on her knees praying to St Anthony that he would survive.

Her prayers were answered, and she sent him a basket of fresh fruit and a potted orchid. But when she rang the Driving School to rebook, the young girl on the phone informed her that Neville had retired and was now living in the NSW Hinterlands and would never teach again!

"Give it up Muriel."

"People of your age should catch the bus."

"But I am not old!" Muriel retorted.

She wished she still had her old landline phone, then she would have slammed it down. That would have said a thousand words. Instead, she jabbed at the red button on her iPhone with her index finger and broke her nail.

Muriel grabbed the handle of the garage door and pulled. The heavy metal door, the colour of russet, creaked and shuddered as it slowly rose. The car took up most of the single door garage. It sat forlorn and silent, still in mourning following the death of her husband, Joe, 12 months ago. She ran her finger along the chrome bumper bar; it was covered in dust and grit. She and Joe had nicknamed the car 'old blue eyes'. It was a pale blue. A colour reminiscent of the 1960's. A spider and her family had made a home on the right-hand side mirror. They had spun a web which extended from the side mirror to the right side of the garage wall. There was a ragged hole in the web where a Kamikaze wasp had ploughed headfirst. With no time to waste, the spider stitched and mended the web with his silken threads. His sights on a laconic horse fly.

Muriel cupped her hands to her face and peered into the back window. The brown, leather bucket seats were still in good condition and the wooden dashboard still gleamed as if it had just been polished. It was about 18 months ago when, on a whim, Joe and she decided to pack an overnight bag and head for the beach. It was early December and already it was a hot, bright day. The light so intense it made them squint. They drove down the Coast to a secluded beach. Stripping off, they ran hand in hand onto the hot sand towards the thunderous roar of the ocean. Sea foam climbed over their warm bodies and playful currents tugged at the tumble of arms and legs. They gasped as they broke the surface and clung to each other giggling like teenagers.

Up on the bluff 'old blue eyes' kept watch. Its pale blue cape followed its voluptuous curves and its regal crown, the Mercedes emblem, reflected the midday sun.

Months had passed. It was late July and winter had dialled up Spring-like conditions. Wisps of translucent clouds were strewn across the crisp, blue sky. Muriel leant against the warmth of the car. Yesterday she turned 71 and today she applied for her driver's licence. She hunted around in her voluminous handbag for her new sunglasses. The young Sales Assistant in the shop said it was the latest fashion trend this summer. She placed it on her face and patted her new haircut and mused that the sunglasses made her look like Audrey Hepburn.

Lionel, her newest Instructor was tall. He had long arms, long legs, a long neck, and long hair which he pulled back into a ponytail or scraped haphazardly on top of his head to form a 'man bun'. He was a stickler for following the rules. At Stop and Give Way signs he made her look left and right at least a dozen times. Sometimes, she felt she was at the Wimbledon watching Nadal and Federer in the finals! Although lacking in loquacity, Lionel had the patience of a Saint and was a distinguished pedagogue.

"Muriel," Lionel shouted.

Lionel hurried towards her. "You did it Muriel! You passed!"

They hugged each other in excitement. Muriel ebullient and profuse with her thanks. She had never seen Lionel so animated. His face was flushed. Strands of hair had escaped from his ponytail and fell around his ears. They parted, promising to keep in touch.

As Muriel slipped behind the wheel, her thoughts turned to Joe. She thought of him every second of every minute of the day. He would be proud!

Tales of a Cricket Tragic

Graham DOUST

I am a cricket tragic. Growing up I dreamed of playing for Australia ... or at least New South Wales. Alas, despite all the hours of practice, I just wasn't good enough to reach such heights. Not to worry! I played local grade cricket and retired from our first eleven just prior to my fiftieth birthday. What did age have to do with that? On field references to my age over those last few years were a little confronting. More confronting was facing the fast bowling of the now mature young men who had reached their prime as athletes and who were ex-students from the school where I was principal. They seemed to seek retribution for the sanctions I may have placed on them in their youth. I was fair game. Returning home each Saturday with more bruises than runs scored was the wake up call!

Soon after, I was introduced to Golden Oldies cricket. I joined the CBC Golden Oldies Cricket Club and toured, with my wife, to many exotic destinations in pursuit of cricket success. Over the next two decades we travelled to Canada, New Zealand, England, Sri Lanka, Argentina, Barbados and South Africa – all under the umbrella of 'oldies' cricket. The game became a motivation to keep fit.

It was on Stanley Park in Vancouver that I became the first CBC club player to take a hat trick in the modern era (the club is over 100 years old). This was probably the most underwhelming hat trick in cricket history. With batting retirement set at forty runs and the right to return and continue the innings if the team is dismissed, the New Zealand team had two very competent English county batsmen. Both scored their forty runs and 'retired'. I managed to have a catch taken off my bowling and then dismissed the incoming batsmen with my next

delivery. The team expressed the need to not take too many wickets, fearing that those two county players could return to bat again. Keeping this in mind I bowled the next delivery only to see it spin past the bat and complete a hat trick. Silence! There was no celebration of my feat. We did, however win the game.

Whilst playing in Harrogate in Yorkshire I was invited to be sponsored by Cricket USA to coach in Colorado. Three summers in the beautiful Rocky Mountains coaching cricket ... I had to pinch myself!

Then an invitation to play 'Over 60's' cricket arrived. Although a little skeptical, I travelled to Armidale to participate in my first NSW State Championships playing for Mid North Coast. Four games in five days ... with little preparation! Having bowled fairly well in the first game, the skipper had me completing all the overs allotted per bowler in every game. On the last day I hobbled down to field at fine leg feeling that age had a great deal to do with my very sore and stiff body and hoping that the ball would not come my way as there was no way I could bend down to pick it up. Teams were announced to play in the Australian Over 60's titles to be held in Melbourne. There it was ... my name listed in the Division 3 team. Playing for NSW at last! Fantastic!

In Melbourne I managed to get plenty of runs and bowled quite well ... and we won the title, Australian Champions!

The games kept coming and the local lads stared in disbelief when I proudly told them I had played over thirty games throughout the season. Not a bad effort at my age!

The ensuing years saw my elevation to the NSW Division Two team where I enjoyed playing with and against some very good cricketers, all of whom had not allowed age to dampen their enthusiasm. The tours to Hobart and then Perth were great fun. Sure, the dressing sheds smelt heavily of horse liniment and were scattered with some interesting knee braces and other interesting body supporting devices but the spirit and camaraderie of participating in a team sport was always apparent.

I was happily ensconced in the team and was shocked that after two reasonably successful years found myself announced to play in the Division One team and also the Northern Division team to play against the visiting England Over 60's Touring Team. My first game was against England and played at Wyong. I was brought onto bowl when the English team was on fire. To say I was a little nervous is an understatement. My first ball was a wide and the second was hammered to deep square leg where the catch was not taken and a boundary ensued. Sixteen runs came off that first over ... a disaster and I was immediately replaced. Much to my surprise I was brought on from the other end straight away and settled down to take 2 for 27 off the nine overs bowled. Then followed a good performance in the annual tournament against Queensland and this cemented my position in the side. I found myself sharing the dressing sheds with some very handy and well known cricketers for the next four years, some of whom had played first grade cricket in Sydney and had been considered for Sheffield Shield selection.

Now having reached three score and ten years the next challenge is to play for NSW in the Over 70's Australian Championships. Yes, the game may prove to be a little slower, the bowling a little more sedate and the running more attuned to a stroll but the spirit and camaraderie will still be the same and the enthusiasm just as great.

So what has age had to do with it? Reaching this age has given me the opportunity to fulfil that childhood cricket dream and you never know ... I might yet play in the Australian Over 70's team and fulfil yet another childhood dream!

Age Has No Barriers

Sheila DRAKELEY

Carefully tying the belt and neatly adjusting the folds of her dressing gown, Claire sat down at the breakfast table. "It's a lovely morning, Dave. Why don't we go down to the beach and have a swim." Frowning at the lack of response she tapped her knife on the marmalade dish.

"Sorry Luv," he said looking over the top of the newspaper, "did you say something?"

"Yes, I said, do you have to read the newspaper while we're having breakfast?"

He grinned. "I was up early this morning so have had my breakfast and," he went on before she could interrupt, "there's a fascinating advertisement in the new classes for retirees column."

Claire slowly spread marmalade on her toast and took a bite. "Well, aren't you interested?"

"Not particularly, there are enough creative classes to keep me busy at the local community centre but, she added stirring her tea, "whatever it is I must have been told. It wouldn't be advertised if it hadn't passed my okay."

"Well, this new class begins today."

"You seem interested, which class is it?"

Dave smiled behind the newspaper and began reading. "Are you a retiree looking for a new dance challenge? If so, come and join our eight week Belly Dancing class run by the renowned performer Rose Thompson. Classes begin at the village Community Hall. Friday 5th August at 10.00 am. Book now by phoning Marjorie Watkins – Secretary."

Dropping her toast Claire grabbed the newspaper. "I don't believe it ... belly dancing! I thought Marjorie was a responsible secretary. What on earth is she thinking and why wasn't I told?" Fanning her flushed face she leaned back in the chair. "It's entirely unsuitable for our members and must be stopped. You're on the committee Dave, will you tell her or shall I?"

"Oh," he said hiding a smile, "I think you're far better at dealing with girly things than me."

"Girly things ... over sixty fives are hardly girls are they?"

"Oh, I don't know. What's age got to do with it?"

"Everything," she snapped and pushing back her chair stormed out of the room.

"A short time later Dave heard Claire's usually sedately driven Mini speed out of the driveway. Focused on her mission Claire rushed into the community hall. Ignoring the lady talking to Marjorie at her desk, she dropped the newspaper in front of her and repeatedly stabbed her finger on the advert. "Did you know about this?"

"Yes I did. It's a completely new activity and we're all very excited." She turned to the lady by her side. "Claire I'd like you to meet Rose, the instructor of the Belly dancing classes."

Claire frowned as she turned to face her. "I'm glad I arrived in time to tell you personally of my objections to what I consider to be a degrading activity for mature women. And I'm sure others will support me saying it will lower the moral standard of our community."

"Nobody else has so far," Rose replied. "The twelve ladies who have signed on today are all keen."

"Do they realise what belly dancing is?"

"And what is it, Claire?"

"Well, in a few words, extremely suggestive body language."

Smiling, Rose handed Claire an illustrated brochure. "This gives a brief history of the dance and where it originated. Some ladies come to learn the art, others for a fun way to lose weight. My girls will be giving a performance at the Town Hall when the classes end."

Claire flinched. "Our members are not young girls."

"No, but young at heart I'm sure. You'd prefer me to call them ladies, would you?"

"Yes, that's more appropriate," Claire said pushing the brochure aside. "But I must point out they have always been happy with the Sewing, Keep fit, Bridge and Scrabble classes."

"I can see you are not going to change your opinion but as my class is about to begin, why don't you sit in as an observer and see for yourself how enjoyable it can be."

"Yes I will and I'm sure the ladies, unaware of what belly dancing entails, will join my protest when they realise what they are getting into."

Claire was stunned when that didn't happen. In the coffee shop later listening to her friends raving about the fun they'd had and how they were looking forward to next week, she realised she had no option but to give up the fight."

Weeks later Dave waved to Claire as she drove away from the house on her way to her evening sewing class. After her outburst, she had spoken little about the belly dancing classes except to tell him they were going ahead. Should he have told her he had purchased a ticket for the concert tonight at the Town Hall? He shrugged. No, what she didn't know wouldn't worry her and keen to see the dancing and judge for himself, he was looking forward to the night's entertainment.

Sitting a few rows back from the stage, his feet tapping to the mystical Eastern music, he watched the curtain rise and the dancers appear on the stage. No, it couldn't be ... his smile broadened as he leaned forward in his seat. Yes, it was, it was Claire ... barefooted and beautiful in a dazzling flimsy outfit, the jewel covering her navel seeming to wink at him as her body swayed and gyrated in rhythm with the music. And surely he hadn't been mistaken thinking their eyes met and the slight wave of her hand was meant for him?

On impulse a few minutes before the concert ended he left the hall and hoping it would amuse her, waited like a stage-door Johnny, outside the exit door. She laughed when she saw him standing there and as he hugged her, he was delighted when she whispered, "I know and you were right ... what's age got to do with it?"

Coming of Age

Shirley DURIGO

As she steps out of the shower, Natalie gazes critically at her glistening body in the misty mirror. Not too bad for an old girl, just turned 60. A few extra kilos and the breasts have slightly gone south, but she looked okay.

Upon closer examination she spies the spidery wrinkles and lines around her eyes and mouth. So much better when you stand further back. Sure there's a little more silver at the temples than last year but it looks good on her. Her sparkling blue eyes reflect a lifetime of caring for others, she smiles slightly showing her even teeth. Not that she smiled all that much last year.

Well not since Mike walked out on her last May. Looking for a new chapter in his life he said. He failed to mention the 30 something blonde she saw with him at work. How could she compete with that? Why some would say that she was 'over the hill', past her prime, a senior or at best mature. Yep she was in her 61st year.

She smears the mirror to get a better look. It will only get worse as the years pass. She certainly didn't feel like a senior, whatever that was! Why she exercised every day and she tried to be careful with her diet. Sometimes she watched it a little too closely as she furtively shoved that pastry in before sculling her skinny cappuccino.

Next chapter?

What about her next chapter?

She and Mike had married young, straight out of university. She had worked as a podiatrist for a couple of years before she raised the three kids. Mike was always working away from home. She literally carried the mother load.

Yep life is what happens when you're busy dealing with life events – working, making a home, paying bills, running after the kids and trying to please everyone. That was her own fault of course.

She had been deeply in love with Mike and couldn't wait to be his wife. Then she couldn't wait to be a mother, to own a home and be able to afford to go on holidays. Natalie worked at break-neck speed with whatever she did. And she did things so very well.

So where was she today?

Treading water?

Marking time?

On her own in a two bedroom unit in the 'burbs at the ripe old age of 60. Mind you she had been 59 when Mike left – just as Covid hit Australia. She had been absolutely devastated, as they had such great plans for their retirement together. Supposedly. What was she to do now?

COVID had clipped her wings even more. She spent the first couple of months of winter glued to the TV set each day, barely venturing outside, sometimes still in her pyjamas at 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

Until her best friend, Prue, dragged her into the shower one day and made her pack a bag and whisked her away for the weekend. They spent the entire time drinking wine and talking about old times at school and university, comparing boyfriends and life experiences. Prue had never married and led a spirited lifestyle. Natalie had always been a little envious, but then she reminded herself that she had three beautiful adult kids and a grandson. They made it all worthwhile! Her best mate shook her out of this stupor, making her realise that she still had so much life to live.

She tracks back through the ages – 21 when she graduated from uni; 22 when she married; 24 when she had Aiden, 26 when the twins were born. She actually remembers feeling a little old at 28. How laughable was that now when she thought back. She and Mike took the kids around Australia for their 30th birthday. For her 40th they went on a cruise where she sipped champagne and danced all night. God she couldn't do that now! Mind you she was never going on a cruise again after Covid.

For her 50th, the family went to a local restaurant where they had a quiet meal. Not much wine flowed that night, with everyone leaving early for other destinations. And then to top things off Mike had forgotten her 59th birthday. She now understood why. After all it was just another day – he had said. Fifty-nine was followed by the big 60 hitting her this year.

If life begins at 40, what were you supposed to do at 60? Was she in fact past it? She shuddered at the thought.

But she *had* taken some baby steps toward her next chapter by updating her wardrobe with active wear and lingerie and even a pair of heels – perish the thought! She had joined a local gym where she gingerly positioned herself at the back of the class, hoping no one would spy her awkward movements. She went to the movies and the theatre on her own and loved it!

At home she danced like no one was watching and sang like no one was listening. It was so liberating!

Then Prue insisted she set up an online dating profile. The cheek of her! She was 60 years old – er young. Surely it was too late to start *that* chapter again! But she discovered a wacky smorgasbord of fellows out there who weren't spring chickens either! She even recognised a couple from school, now balding and overweight. She had chatted online, but was yet to find the courage to meet anyone in person just yet.

Yes her reflection showed a mature woman in pretty good shape who was finally starting to pull the threads of her new life together. Yes she was 60. Yes she was single. But she still had some good years in her yet. Whilst she couldn't run as fast; stay up as late; drink as much as she could when she was younger, she was going to give this life a good shake.

After all what's age got to do with it?

My New Career is Old Age

Connie EALES

Age has everything to do with it!

One day when sitting in my office at work, I had a rude awakening. I was about fifty at the time and, just out of the blue, I suddenly realised that my past was longer than my future. What did this mean? I must admit I felt a bit panic-stricken. This meant that my death was closer than my birth. I had only ever fleetingly thought of death as some distant future thing which really had nothing whatever to do with me.

I had been living a golden age. I felt invincible. I was going places in my career and in my life generally. I had been fortunate enough to have received a good university education (including post graduate) and I worked in a satisfying profession. I was living life to the full.

It was a good life – good job, good health, good books, good looks, good music, good friends, beautiful home, wonderful husband, holidays. We had two beautiful clever daughters and I was so proud of them. The girls and I were close and we spent wonderful times together. I taught them a second language; I read to them when they were young and I taught them songs which they loved. My husband and I took them travelling in Australia and overseas and they were so eager to learn. Such rewarding children. In later life they told me I had been a role model for them. What mother doesn't revel in hearing something like that? I loved being a parent and I loved my job. I felt I was at the top of Maslow's hierarchy – self-actualized.

If the stock market crashed, I didn't worry. I had plenty of time, I thought, to earn more money for my eventual retirement.

I was devastated when my husband died at sixty-two. I had given up my job to care for him in his last months of life, to try to make that time as good as possible for him. Then within the next few years I lost both my daughters. And sadly, I have outlived most of my friends as well. To fill the void, I spent years doing voluntary work for various community initiatives until I felt I could do that no more. I learnt to play the piano. I painted.

But at 82, I find that age still has everything to do with it. Now I have to contend with the travails of old age. Most, if not all, my physiological problems are associated with the ageing process. I started to perceive old age as a long series of losses and a steady painful path towards ultimate death. Not a welcome prospect!

Losing money, status, good health and loved ones can be pretty soul-destroying and I found myself becoming prey to depression. I was plummeting to the base of Maslow's Triangle. Every new day I would wonder what would be the next thing to go wrong – would it be heart, stomach, bladder, bowels? Would I have a stroke or a heart attack? Or worst of all possible scenarios, would I get dementia? Everyday jobs got harder to do and would take me longer. I would get a crook back every time I rode the ride-on mower or cleaned out the guttering. Arthritis was creeping relentlessly into all my joints. What a miserable existence and nobody to share it!

Would I sit around feeling sad and 'waiting for God'? I had to decide.

After a lot of thought, study and self-examination, I have come to see life and death as a continuum rather than two separate events. So, grasping for life still, I tried to find another way of existing. I tried to understand that death is the price you pay for life because without death, there would be no life. I am grateful for the life I have had, even if it is now gone. I have many reminders of that life. I have photographs, videos and best of all, I have memories. My lost ones have become glorious 'ideas' and I can summon them whenever I want.

I have invented for myself a new awareness of being alive in the world. From the moment of birth, death is the final destination, but I found that I could re-create myself with a new awareness and enjoyment of the world around me and live the life I now have, while I still have it. I now find myself looking around at the beautiful world. I snuggle and enjoy a warm comfortable bed. I love a good book and I no longer feel I have to finish it if it doesn't please me. The same with a movie. I no longer make conversation with people I don't like just because it's socially expected. I seek out and spend time with the people I do like. I enjoy a new app, Wisteria, Jasmine and Lavender, tea from beautiful china and the sunshine and a drive in the countryside. I revel in a warm fire in winter, the occasional forbidden choc chip muffin and the freedom to have breakfast or dinner in bed on a rainy day with the electric blanket and the TV. I even enjoy shopping in the supermarket now that it's no longer a mad rush to fit it in between work commitments.

Now, before I undertake an activity, I ask myself, 'Do you really want to do this?' and if the answer is 'Not really' then I don't do it. Instead, I ask myself, 'What would you like to do next?'

Sound hedonistic?

Well perhaps it is, but I deserve it.

Small things in life make life a big thing because now every moment of living has its own meaning. I have found I can do this alone just by positive thinking.

My new-found mode of existing is strangely satisfying and it is quite independent of age.

And I write!

That is completely independent of age.

Sunshine

Judith EBURN

"What'll we do today, Else? It better be cheap. I only got two dollars."

"Don't matter, May old pal. We could take a squiz at the new op shop. Belle says it's good."

"What would she know? Don't go to that sort of place. Don't need to."

"No, but the old dames that go in her shop, they tell her and she told me."

"Well – I s'pose we could just look."

"That's the spirit matey. Do us good to get out in the sun after all that rain. Wear your hat, mind."

May scrabbles in a drawer and pulls out a beige cloth hat, pushes it onto her head. From a hook on the wall Elsie takes a big battered straw with a purple ribbon circling the crown. It makes her feel special.

Elsie can't step out as she'd like to. Poor little May would struggle to keep up. There was a time, years ago, when they'd have raced each other to get there first. Well, she says to herself, can't live in the past, today's what counts. And they reach the shop.

"I dunno," says May doubtfully, "it looks quite flash."

"And so do we in our hats. Come on, Maysy, give it a go."

They go in and see that the clothes are on racks and sorted according to colour. May's eyes open wide with wonder. "Oh Else, it's like a rainbow!"

"Just like. I'm going to try orange, it's a nice sunshiny colour."

"Orange? With your hair?"

"Don't matter, why not?" May decides not to answer. Elsie's hair will probably be a different colour next week.

"Cheer up, old pal," says Elsie, "ya oughta know me by now. And come to think of it, a bit of colour wouldn't hurt you either. How about that bright pink? That's pretty."

May wanders off. Elsie pulls out several tops and holds them against her in front of a mirror, under the watchful gaze of the woman behind the desk. She knows the type, the kind who would swap price tags given half a chance. Mutton dressed as lamb.

"May, will ya look at this?" Elsie holds up a shining sequined top with a lace frill down the front.

"What d'ya reckon? Suit me?"

After all these years May shouldn't be surprised, but she can't help blurting out: "At your age?"

Elsie glares at her.

"What d'ya mean 'at my age'? What's that got to do with it? It's gorgeous!"

"Well, yes, I s'pose it is – sort of."

"Never mind 'sort of'. Anyways, they figure you're as old as you feel, and right now I feel like wearing this. Why not?"

"It looks expensive. Do you have enough?"

Elsie looks at the tag. \$8. Her shoulders sink. Then May spots a sign high on the wall that says *Opening Sale – Everything Half Price.*

"Else, Else, look at this," she calls, anxious to get back in her good books. "It's really only four dollars. I can lend a dollar if ya need it."

Elsie gives May a giant hug.

"Thanks lovey, but I got four. Someone up there's lookin' after us today."

"Yair," May smiles "'cos we deserve it."

"And remember, next week we'll get a nice pink one for you."

They leave the shop and head down the street, with Elsie resplendent in her shiny new blouse. From a building site comes a whistle of appreciation. She smiles smugly.

"See? Like I told you mate, age has got nothin' to do with it."

A Fisherman's Tale

Graham ELPHICK

My story is one filled with the wonders of Nature. I have spent many hours over many days, months and years, pursuing the wonderful art of fishing.

BUT, over the whole of my lifetime, I guess I haven't caught enough fish to pay for the bait, but I love it, with being out in the fresh air, amongst nature, and while awaiting a bite, marvelling at the sights and sounds surrounding me.

I watch the interacting of the birds, with the noisy Mynah birds chasing other bigger birds, such as Magpies, away from their territory. Also, the humble Pee Wee does the same thing, even though much smaller.

But, to top it all, the beautiful Willy Wagtail, fiercely drives all the larger birds from his domain, fiercely dive-bombing all enemies, and there can be a White Cockatoo, sitting quietly on the power lines, and Willy, and mate, sit one on either side, and take turns in flying up and picking poor Cockatoo on the head, till finally he gives up, and flies away.

Also, some of my fishing is done in local freshwater lakes, where I can sit, again, awaiting a bite, and watching nature.

The ducks, as soon as they see someone coming to the water's edge, congregate around them, hoping for some tasty bread scraps.

Also, a small bubble breaks the water's surface, and a tiny nose and eye appear just above the water's surface, belonging to a little turtle.

I mainly (in fresh water) fish for European Carp, as these are a menace to our environment, by eroding the banks, and polluting the water with stirred up mud, and eating baby native fish. These fish must be killed on taking out of the water, and there is a big fine, for placing them back in the water.

It is a real challenge, catching these fish, as after being caught, and escaping, they know there is a fisherperson in their vicinity.

So, they pick up the bait (usually bread or corn kernel) and slowly pull it away and then let it go, to our consternation.

Also I have, on a great many occasions, after a catch of a couple of Carp, seen very large specimens swim into my vicinity, and turn on their side at the water's surface, look me in the eye with their eye, and then give a big flap of their tale, and go back into the deep.

I have fished a great many times, but I NEVER eat fish, or seafood for that matter, which some find strange.

When I fish, I only use barbless hooks, so as not to hurt the fish, and I only photograph my catch, and release it back into the water.

At a younger time, my wife (who is till with me after 59 years marriage) and I had a routine of going out fishing every Sunday morning. We left home at 4.30 am with our three kids, and set off to different locations in the Sydney area, for a morning's fishing.

We always had two bricks and an old barbecue plate in the boot of the car, and when we got to the fishing spot, Marj (God love her) always set up the bricks and barbecue plate, and lit up the kindling wood we always took with us, and cooked the most wonderful, and tasty, bacon, sausages and eggs, on toast, followed by a cup of coffee out of the thermos flask we always took with us.

It was the most beautiful, relaxing feeling, eating toast and sausages, etc., and drinking coffee, and just admiring the scenery around us.

When we got too old to drive to our fishing and the kids had grown up, and moved away, Marj and I still managed our fishing.

We caught a train from here, to Strathfield again at 4.30 am, and alighted at Strathfield to get a connecting train to Woy Woy, which is a lovely little train trip.

We stayed at a cheap little motel right near the wharf, which only cost us \$99.00 for the night, and rose before sun-up and watched the magnificent sunrise over Pelican Island.

Eventually, as I have Motor Neurone Disease, it became impossible for me to catch trains, after nearly falling between a train and the platform, which took away my confidence for train rides, BUT, we have so many wonderful memories of places and times, fishing, just in the Sydney area.

The Swim

Jenny ENGLAND

I had only been waiting for about ten minutes but it was the kind of ten minutes that seemed like an eternity. I lay back on the towel and closed my eyes. Relax ... I reassured myself, he'll be here soon. I buried my toes in the warm sand and listened to the cheerful squeals of a toddler playing nearby. A cool wisp of fresh afternoon breeze tickled my face.

"Been waiting long?" a familiar voice suddenly greeted me from behind.

"Just a few minutes," I lied, turning and smiling as he knelt down beside me on the sand. He leaned over and brushed my cheek with an affectionate kiss. "Well, then... ready for a swim?"

I quickly slipped off my blouse and skirt and tucked them into my bag. Now stripped down to my swimsuit, I mused how I had never really liked revealing my body to the world but I felt comfortable with him, more comfortable than with anyone else. Ever. I watched as he stripped down to his swim shorts.

The sun was gradually sinking behind a few clouds casting interesting shadows on the sand. Tiny ripples of light glimmered on the surface of the nearby ocean pool. We walked silently to the steps and dipped our toes in to test the water temperature.

"You first," I challenged.

"We'll go together," he replied taking me by the hand and propelling us forward into the water.

We flipped onto our backs and floated for a while enjoying the warm afternoon sun on our faces. *We must look like a couple of beached whales*, I thought. Still, I wasn't perturbed, I was with him and that was all that mattered.

"Race you!" he suddenly cried pointing to the far edge of the pool.

"Not too fast," I replied cheekily.

Within minutes we both reached the far edge where we settled treading water, close together. I trembled as his leg brushed up against me and he put his arm around my waist, holding me gently.

"I still can't believe that you found me on Facebook after all these years. Almost fifty to be exact," I began. "And if it hadn't been for my kids who talked me into signing up, I would have never found you. So, I guess it was fate."

I felt him tighten his arm around me a little and he smiled. "Remember those camping trips we used to take? What about that Easter when it rained the whole time and we were soaked to the skin and completely washed out? But of course it didn't matter. We were young and everything we did was an adventure back then."

"It just seems like yesterday."

Letting go of me suddenly he sprang backwards into the deep water again. "Come on just one more lap before it gets too cold," he urged.

I let go of the pool edge too and settled into a slow breaststroke. I couldn't keep up with his brisk backstroke but did catch up to him as we reached the steps.

"Come on let's get dry and warm again," he said taking my hand leading me back to the sand where my towel and bag were waiting.

It was his gentle strength that had always attracted me most. He hadn't changed. Well, yes, he did have less hair and had put on a few kilos over the years and his eyes weren't as bright as they were in his youth. But he was still the same quiet confident person I had loved all those years ago when we were teenagers. I wondered if he thought I had changed. The years had turned a free-spirited adventurous into a round contented middle aged woman. He didn't seem to mind though.

He picked up my towel and tenderly patted me dry.

"Sometimes when we are together I like to imagine that we are alone on a desert island, just the two of us." He looked at me and continued "with not a single care in the world. Sometimes I also wonder what our lives might have been like if..."

"What ifs are pointless," I interrupted. "If there is anything I have learned from the last fifty years it is that there is only now. However, the last few months have been wonderful."

"Well, I guess we better get going. The traffic can be horrific at this time on a Friday afternoon."

We walked in comfortable silence to the car park. I noticed the shrubs along the pathway. They looked tired. Most had lost their bloom: it was nearing the end of summer. Autumn was merely weeks away. In no time it would be too cold to swim. I didn't want to entertain that thought.

We reached my car and he leant down and kissed me tenderly on the lips then turned towards his car parked nearby.

"Your house or mine tonight?"

"Mine this time," I replied with a smile. Then all the way home in the car I reflected on the thought that for true love and romance, *age definitely has nothing to do with it!*

The Circle of Life

Ann EYERS

“What use are we, to trees? She remembers the Buddha’s words: *A tree is a wondrous thing that shelters, feeds, and protects all living things. It even offers shade to the axmen who destroy it.*” From ‘*The Overstory*’, Richard Powers

Long before I knew trees as *life givers* I had many friends among them. Misshapen angophoras, and a variety of other eucalypts, wattles and banksias of the dry forest, stood between the place I lived in as a child and Balmoral Beach. They were beautiful backdrops to my childhood and their like now stand between my current home and Narrabeen Lake as backdrops to my old age. They care for the local wildlife which bring me joy and they help manage and protect the ecosystems of which I am a part.

At Balmoral Beach the giant figs always greeted children with open arms. When I was a small girl I climbed into the laps of these sentinels of the sand to stay safe from my fears. My grandchildren too have curled up in the arms of the same figs.

Now I have grevilleas in my garden which provide food for visiting nectar feeding native birds and bees. The red gum in the side garden is my living Christmas tree, blazing with frothy red flowers and humming with bees in December each year.

Today, as the birds and bees busy themselves in the lilly pilly trees outside my front window, I think of the circle of life in various ecosystems. All the bacteria, plants, insects and animals, and me. I look at the lilly pilly trees and think of the circle of life of trees. I reflect on how like the trees I am, although they don’t need me in the same way as I need them.

Each lilly pilly grew from the seed which contained its destiny and all that it needed to keep it alive until it found fertile soil into which it could put down its roots. Each grew from a tiny sapling to a thriving tree by taking advantage of its surrounding clean air, water, nutrients and sunshine until it flowered and fruited. It’s what I wish for the children of the world.

In the 1950s my mother built a new home on a block of land at Narrabeen. As more homes were built on what were bush blocks then, more trees were felled. My Pa, an axeman, was asked to fell a tree considered dangerous at the back of our house. Taking his axe, he chipped this way and that until, with one final blow, the tree cast its length down a path between houses and across the road. It was chopped up by onlookers for firewood.

Since they’d first arrived in this country my family had been felling forest giants on the east coast of Australia around the rich river systems. They believed then that trees and forests were an endless resource for the benefit of humankind. Many of them didn’t realise our lives depend on the survival of trees.

The Indigenous peoples of many areas around the world fervently voice for us our connectedness to the land, trees and living webs. They tell us how the sap in a tree pulses like the blood in our bodies and the soft movement of the wind in the leaves is the tree breathing in carbon dioxide from the air and breathing out our life-giving oxygen. Scientists agree with them.

Looking back on my life, I see that good fortune has provided me with a safe place in the natural world and the circle of life and I’m grateful for it. I constantly wonder though how I can help protect our living teachers like the trees, so that they can continue their multiple roles in our lives and the lives of the children of the world.

I don't have the wealth, power or words to make a big difference globally but after eighty years of lived experience I consider that I'm a thinking, feeling, link in the vast circle of life.

I found it difficult however to fit my small attempts at change into the far reaching goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Then I found 'The Lazy Person's Guide to Saving the World', also under the UN's banner. In just one A4 double sided page it identifies actions an individual like me can take in my own neighbourhood and from my own home in order to live a life I can sustain. This blueprint for action may help me to encourage my government to revise and meet important targets.

Now that I am an almost fully realised human being, about to close the circle of my life, I can use the UN guide to develop a strategy plan of actions I still have time to take in support of the lives for whom new seeds have and will be planted.

My hope is that my small actions, like reducing and recycling, when added to the positive actions of other individuals and groups, can help drive the cycle of events which will enable the principle called 'the circle of life'.

My goal is to try to positively contribute to tomorrow's world, (natural, human and animal), to help reach an equitable and sustainable environment, as free of injustice, violence and fear as possible. While I strive for that goal I'll continue to live, love and enjoy my life and all the life within and around me.

It Happens and it's OK

Jennifer FERGUS

Looking back twenty years, I now realise that when 55, I was really, 'late middleaged'.

It's not by chance that 'retirement villages' are for '55s and over'. The planners and developers know that 55 is the start of the 'down-hill-run'. Now, that might sound harsh but it has to be faced: time is running out. There's nothing to stop you making grand plans but there's plenty to stop you completing them. Or being physically fit to enjoy them.

In fact for many, 55 summers is the time to sell the house (if you're lucky to own one), releasing it for the next generation. It's time to 'downsize' for the next move: to have the big clear-out. And I don't just mean the accumulated junk. I mean the valuables and the wedding presents. You kept them 'for good', for those oh-so-few-special-occasions. All those platters, cake-stands, cutglass bowls, and all manner of dainty stuff. The sad thing is, you find your kids don't want them. They cook (if they do) and eat differently these days. And besides, that stuff was never microwave or dishwasher material. It's a shame you didn't get your wear out of them.

Fifty-five is often the beginning of noticeable flab and paunch. They appear overnight. Mysteriously. Or you think it's mysteriously until you acknowledge your increasing lifestyle of alcohol and slouch. And from sixty onwards, many find everything harder (you drink more), takes longer (you do less), and your painful bits demand rest (you ease up). You're stiffer in thinking and movement and, perhaps, a tad forgetful: how to get there? where you put it? what happens next? You find quieter things now appeal because they're less taxing. You eye your cohort who are fit, active, and mentally sharp, with a mixture of envy and resentment. But that could be just me.

Years ago, I secretly blamed my declining memory on 'Mad Cow's' disease. It's not mentioned now, but enough of us still remember. Serves me right for spending the children's inheritance on UK trips to see family in the 1980s and '90s. It was impossible to decline their offerings of carefully-made meat meals. And, to confirm my self-diagnosis, I was tempted to have Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) because friends swore it "fixed them up". So, I thought perhaps HRT would also help me. If it did, then I could stop blaming 'Mad Cow'. But then I checked research findings and decided, best not. You find after 55, there are no easy answers.

When younger, I enjoyed watching TV. But now, I limit my viewing and 'streaming'. I rarely watch 'current affairs' for fear of prompting outrage, sadness, frustration. I've gone beyond trite 'happy family' shows and portrayals of young love and angst. And I can't keep up with fast-talking comedies. So now, when I sit in the waitingrooms of my doctor, dentist, orthotist, ophthalmologist, physiotherapist, specialist, audiologist, I hardly know who's who in the magazines. Which takes the fun out of waiting. Instead, I write lists of my 'issues' – in case I forget why I'm there.

Fifteen years ago, I started thinking what 60 might be like. I hoped I'd sleep better. I hoped I'd be less vain and stop trying to not-look-my-age. I hoped that if lucky, I'd be a grandmother with a ready-made role, and a child who'd see and love me as I was – without tender memories of when I was 20, 30, 40

...

And then, I could just get on with it.

But no. My eldest grand-daughter then carefully examined me. She looked at my hands and, in a concerned voice, asked me about the thick, bluish, rivers of veins snaking all over them. What could I say ? She was right, they were a worry. But they were who I was. And am now; just more so. Being tactful, she didn't even mention the gathering wrinkles and grey hair. So I talked about ageing in a matter-of-fact way: it's part of life to get older, and to look it. But she wasn't happy. She insisted I wasn't old – I thought more for her sake than mine – so we settled for, "Grandma is OLDISH!" I accepted that. Now, I'm just heaps more oldish. And age has everything to do with it!

However, there is consolation. Like most grandchildren, she, her brother, and cousin, continue to keep me youngish, without my even trying. It's a wonderful thing.

On My Senior 'L' Plates

Gisela FISCHER

I consider myself a beginner in this wonderful new world of being a senior and have embraced it with open arms. A few years back as my 60th birthday was approaching, I decided it was time to dip into my little nest egg and turn this milestone into a magical year to remember. It started with an East Caribbean cruise on the majestic MSC Divina (a ship inspired by the beautiful Sophia Loren) to some of the most intriguing islands in the West Indies. Weeks prior to my retirement, I found myself constantly singing The Beach Boys Kokomo song "Aruba, Jamaica" and felt it was my destiny to visit these exotic places. Blessed with sunshine and smooth sailing on the Caribbean Sea, we soon found ourselves at sandy beaches and swimming in crystal clear aquamarine water. Colourful umbrellas sheltered us while we relaxed, sipping Pina colodas amidst a rainbow of people and cultures that make up this beautifully blended world.

We were mesmerized by the tropical plants and local wildlife and discovered new things every day. How does the cashew nut grow? Our guide picked a red cherry fruit off a tree and showed us the single nut on top. He explained how the locals place the cashews on rooves to dry out. I now appreciate the price of cashews! We saw the devastation caused by Hurricane Irma in 2017, and the locals struggling to rebuild. In Martinique, the lovely backdrop of the Mt Pelee volcano was a constant reminder of the 1902 eruption as we explored sites of the ruins left behind. Meandering through forests, the road led to a rum distillery where we could watch the process and taste the flavours of rum made from sugarcane.

On St Maartens we strolled along Maho Beach where planes flew over, almost within touching distance of those sunbaking below, to land nearby at Princess Juliana Airport. Every day was like a breath of fresh air. We literally even had monkeys on our backs at St Kitts, a heavenly paradise of green palms and ferns. Life truly is a banquet!

Back in South Beach, Miami we splurged on an unforgettable lunch in the mansion of Gianni Versace. Tender grilled octopus was served followed by a raspberry sorbet dessert, all accompanied by a lychee martini. The setting was luxurious in keeping with the taste and style of the world-famous fashion designer. Grand statues and fountains decorated the cobblestone courtyard, and chandeliers even hung in the bathroom. We felt privileged to be seated on the terrace overlooking the elaborate Italian-tiled pool, and yet saddened at the thought of Gianni's assassination at his own front gate.

A 1959 Model Edsel Corsair (named after Henry Ford's son), was the vehicle we chose to tour Miami based on my year of birth. Our French Chauffeur Andre greeted us and said, "Get ready to wave ladies, everyone stares and takes photos when they see this car". We felt like we were famous! The car was gorgeous and the colour of my scarf even matched its turquoise trimmings. We drove around Miami holding on to our hats, past the exclusive islands and multitude of yachts moored along Millionaires Row. We felt so free, and young and alive riding in the open-air convertible. Our beaming smiles said it all. Andre even stopped to buy us a small espresso, "Cuban style" he said.

To top off our fabulous adventure, we journeyed down to Key West crossing all those narrow bridges connecting the Florida Keys, which can often be seen in action movies. In fact, the whole town made me feel like I was on a movie set. A cartoon-like green trolley train allowed us to hop on and off at our leisure. It was surreal to be in Ernest Hemingway's home, complete with marlin he caught on fishing trips adorning his walls, and with cats roaming about and curled up on his bed. President Truman's Little White House revealed his love of card-playing in the form of a bespoke table. My favourite was perhaps the Mel Fisher Museum, filled with history about the 1622 sunken Spanish ship *Atocha*, and the treasures he discovered at the bottom of the ocean. Gold bars, coins, canons, and precious jewels found on the shipwreck were on display. When the pleasant aroma from a waterfront shack-style restaurant reached us, we stopped to taste local delicacies like Conch and Key Lime pie.

Home sweet home, back in Australia the celebrations continued with loved ones. We spent two nights at Circular Quay where our balcony offered views over the wharf piers, the mighty Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Overseas Passenger Terminal with new cruise liners in port each day. I could spend hours watching our beloved green and yellow Sydney ferries busily manoeuvre their way around Port Jackson on this picture-perfect day. My dearest friends joined us at a Miami-style Cocktail Bar in the evening, all of us in disbelief that we have reached the ripe old age of 60, and yet at heart we still felt and laughed like the carefree 18-year-old students we once were.

The Sydney Opera House was the venue for the Grand Finale, my actual birthday. My younger brother witnessed my journey through life this far so I couldn't have wished to spend this special evening dining with anyone else. A window seat meant we could truly enjoy the city lights. I reminisced about the time our family attended the Grand Opening of the Sydney Opera House by the young Queen Elizabeth II in 1973. I also thought back to how our life began in Australia. After disembarking the *Castel Felice* in 1961, we lived at the Bonegilla Hostel for Migrants before heading to Sydney, the place we love and call home.

Today I still see life through the same eyes of that young girl and I still share her dreams, her enthusiasm and joy for LIVING each precious new day.

The Painting

Wendy FISHER

“Cold enough to freeze a witch’s tit,” was one of my mother’s favourite sayings, and seemed very appropriate this particular Sunday as the bitter wind funneled between the stalls of the local market. It had become a weekly habit – mooching through bric-a-brac – I had long had a fascination for all things old – antiques, books, paintings, ornaments, and the like, and could never resist the hunt for that next unusual object.

Having ventured out, scarf wrapped tightly around my neck, I nodded to a few regulars, and wandered past colourful displays of fruit and veg, stacks of unwanted CD’s, clothing stalls displaying shapeless, Chinese-made jackets, and slowly made my way towards Jack’s stall, where I had bought a few nice pieces over the years. As I approached, I cast a discerning glance over the eclectic mix of items – old clocks, tools from a bygone era, kitchen implements which had certainly seen better days, boxes of tatty-sleeved LPs, wooden dolls, prints, crockery – the usual.

“Good morning, Jack,” I said, “Got anything new?” Jack was a small, pale man, rheumy blue eyes set in pinched cheeks, his frail body turning in on itself as if trying to protect his very core from the cold – he always wore the same filthy finger-less gloves.

“What’s good about it.” Jack snapped, “This wind keeps the punters away.” He turned to point to a vintage record player with a broken arm, some rugs, and a couple of very large paintings propped up against the wall behind him. “Something might take your fancy.”

Quickly discarding the first few items, I approached the top painting – a washed out country scene, like so many of the romantic era. I was about to turn away, when something caught my eye. My heart was thumping in my ribcage – I could hardly swallow. I stared, I stared hard – I just had to have it! My eyes hadn’t lied, as they made out the words “blue-black Fjord” faintly etched in the oak-coloured frame – it had been done with a naive hand – somewhat clumsily. Jack saw my interest in the piece, and sniffed a sale. “Worth quite a bit that one – there’s an age to it – look alright in your place. Good solid frame too,” he continued.

“Oh, what’s age got to do with it, Jack – it’s just a ‘nice’ scene – nobody wants just ‘nice’ these days – times have changed – people want ‘different’.

“Still,” I continued, clearing my throat, “the muted colours *might* suit, but the frame’s had it – pretty tatty, I’d have to replace that.” The haggling began. “I’ll give you 20 quid.”

Jack scowled, “Twenty quid for that big piece? – I won’t take less than fifty – worth every penny, but tell you what, seeing as it’s you, I’ll throw in a free delivery – you wouldn’t get it in your car anyway. I’ll drop it round in the van tomorrow.” A handshake sealed the deal, and I turned to walk home hardly able to conceal my excitement. “What’s age got to do with it, Jack?” Quite a lot in this instance, I chuckled to myself.

I could not believe what I had just purchased – a genuine Van Gogh picture frame. I had read somewhere that in one of his depressive moods, Vincent had scratched a poem which included the lines, ‘Still, deathly tired over the blue-black Fjord and city hung blood and tongues of fire’ on the frame of one of his paintings. The original canvas and frame had become separated over the years – the picture I now had was worthless, but that frame was a once-in-a-lifetime find. I practically ran home, my mind whirring. I would contact some art dealers to work out the best way to offer the frame to the art circles. Sotheby’s, yes, of course, definitely Sotheby’s – they knew their stuff. I can give up teaching, I can travel, I can write a book, get a name for myself.

After a sleepless night, Jack’s battered white van drew up outside my house the next morning. Excitement turned to slight bemusement as Jack approached the front door with what looked like a rolled up rug under one arm. “I think you’ve made a mistake, Jack,” I laughed, opening the door to his knock. “Mine’s the large painting remember – the rug must be for someone else.”

“Oh no, no mistake,” Jack said. “You didn’t like the frame, so thought I’d do you a favour and dispose of it for you. I used it for firewood last night – good and solid – kept me warm for hours it did ... here’s your painting. I rolled it up in the rug to stop it getting damaged. See you next week”?

Lucky in Love

Shirley GALLOWAY

As it was our 64th Wedding Anniversary on the 23rd of March this year 2021, I felt I had to write about our marriage. Ian and I have had a very lucky life together having so many precious memories to look back on. I must admit I did have several boyfriends prior to meeting Ian; two even had their own cars back in 1956. Ian and I met at a dance in the Star Hotel, Maidstone, Kent. I actually went out with two of his dancing friends before I went out with Ian. Bill was the first one to ask me out, but I only dated him once. Then Les asked me out, I went out with him a few times prior to him going to Canada. He stayed in touch while he was there where he was helping to build an aeroplane runway, despite being an Insurance Salesman.

One particular evening after dancing with Ian most of the night, something 'clicked' with me. Ian told me that he had been out with two or three girlfriends albeit briefly. Ian's way of travelling those days was on a motor bike. I clearly remember the first time he took me out on his bike, I was the pillion rider and Ian gave me a crash helmet to wear. After about fifteen minutes he called out, "Are you okay, Shirley?"

I had my arms around his waist and squeezed him tightly, answering, "Yes I'm good thanks Ian." The reason I squeezed him was because he used my name and not Blondie as some of my earlier boyfriends did, which I disliked. Another fond memory was when we were listening to the radio and chatting one night in Mum and Dad's home, Ian totally surprised me by taking a mouth organ out of his pocket and played for me. 'Give me a kiss to build a dream on' of course I just had to kiss him and we have never looked back since that very special moment.

Another memorable occasion when we were dancing together at the Star one Saturday night the band was playing a popular Elvis Presley song, which Ian and I were jiving along to. Ian began imitating Elvis by swaying his hips and legs the way Elvis did. I burst out laughing, as did he, and all the dancers around us watched him and laughed along with us. One thing I have always loved about Ian is that he has a great sense of humour and can be very quick witted, typically English, which lightens any moment at any time. Not to forget his soft blue eyes which sparkle when he laughs, and his darker blond hair cropped neatly I found extremely attractive.

I missed Ian so much when he had to sign up for National Service which was compulsory those days. He was in the Royal Engineers and ended up in Germany. He came home on leave and because I didn't want to lose him we got married, having only two nights' honeymoon before he went back to Germany. However we certainly made up for it when he was discharged and had two wonderful weeks touring Cornwall and Devon on his motorbike. Whilst away together we made the best decision of our lives to migrate to Australia.

We arrived in Australia as what was classified those days 'Ten Pound Poms' at the end of January 1959 almost newlyweds, loved Sydney from the moment we arrived. Also being the first lot of immigrants to fly to Australia in a Super Constellation via Canada, New York, San Francisco, Honolulu, Canton Island and Fiji. It was a four day flight ending at a migrant camp in Cronulla. Luckily we both got work quickly; Ian being a Litho printer, I was a Shorthand Typist/Secretary those days, we bought our own home within two years.

We are now both very blessed with two loving, caring children our son Graham, beautiful daughter Leigh. The best daughter-in-law Christine married to Graham; they have two wonderful grandchildren Jay and Lara. How lucky are we! Up until Ian had a hip replacement, we were still dancing, ballroom, new vogue, jiving and rock and roll, at least three times a week, just loving it. Now Ian can manage a slow waltz, but we can't complain we have had a wonderful life together. What's age got to do with it? How lucky in love we have been especially living in Sydney. How lucky is that!

The Retirement Quilt

Ronald Lee GAUDREAU

It was a thought-provoking comment made by a friend that started me on my year-long project. "Since you no longer will be going to an office, you can throw away your ties."

I was 81, and while I no longer had paid employment, I was still occupying space in an office provided by friends and still giving advice and assistance to some of my clients. For fifteen years, I arrived at 0700 and left at 1600 each weekday and on Saturdays from 0800-1500. I still walked the 2,000 steps to and from my home to the office, and I still dressed in a tie and jacket during those weekdays, something I had done all my working life.

I thought about the suggestion that I throw away my ties. As I looked at the 100 ties, I realised that they represented so many different milestones in my life. There was my college tie, one I bought at Brooks Brothers when I started college, ties given to me on birthdays and at Christmas by friends and lovers. Some ties represented my trips abroad – London, Paris, Rome. They were of different materials – silk, wool, cotton, leather. How could I possibly throw them away?

At dinner the following week, I mentioned my epiphany. During the discussion that ensued, one of my older friends said, "Why not make a quilt out of your ties?"

Everyone seemed to agree with this, and the next day I googled, 'Quilts made from men's ties' and found exactly the pattern I wanted by a designer, Anita Bradshaw, in the United States. Armed with this information, I went back to my 80-year-old friend Maisie, whose suggestion prompted my search and who had experience creating quilts. I showed her a picture of the quilt I had in mind.

Maisie outlined the process for creating a quilt. While she supported my wish to be involved, she felt that my lack of needlework experience would be a significant problem. She volunteered to assist. I then had an inspiration. "Why not have men sew the tie quilt?" I could approach senior citizen centres or retirement centres, or unemployed men with tailoring experience and pay them. Maisie and I could supply the ties, backing and other supplies, and she could provide the instruction. Unfortunately, I did not receive encouragement from the centres that I contacted nor from Centrelink.

I postponed my plans for the quilt at the end of 2017 due to the holidays and theatre commitments. However, the quilt played a role in my discussions with my Personal Trainer, Euan. Since 2016, I had been attending a gym, The Playground. Anyone who is over 70 and never been to a gym visualised it as a place where young people with well-toned bodies go to retain their fitness or over-muscle bodybuilders work out. I was neither!

Having overcome cancer and a hip replacement and reached 80, I knew that walking alone would not give me the exercise that I required. I, therefore, committed myself to Playground in Surry Hills. My initial experience awoke me to the lack of respect that those my age receive. However, I found the right trainer with the right attitude, and after I had said, "What is not recognized is that people my age are loyal. We do not chop and change our professionals. We also have more discretionary income and can afford to maintain our gym membership and training, even though our health funds fail to recognise the value of what we are doing. We also keep our appointments, and we follow instructions."

As part of The Playground's protocol, they review each client's goals at the beginning of each year. Therefore, in January 2018, Euan and I discussed my goal for 2018. He laughed when I said, "I hope to make it to the end of the year."

I told him about my quilt project and my problems enlisting the support. We also discussed my thoughts about writing a book. He then threw out a challenge, "I want you to commit yourself to complete the first draft of a book by your birthday, the 28th of July."

I accepted the challenge and decided to write a story about men creating a quilt made from ties. My writing experience was more academic and formal and my concern was that this would not lend itself to romantic fiction. I obtained approval from Anita Bradshaw to use her quilt design as the book's cover and started writing.

I created a town, Morton, in the Hunter Valley, and its 200 year old history, which reflected its farming and mining and early immigrants, mostly Scottish and Irish. The principal characters are four men involved in the making of the quilt – Geoffrey, a recently widowed 69 year old and retiring executive and owner of the ties; Bryan, a 60s ex-con, ex-drug addict; Barry, a 50s recovering alcoholic and gay entertainer; and Russell, a 60's ex-boxing champion. The men produce the quilt, but the spirit and love of Geoffrey's deceased wife and the support of three other strong women give meaning to their lives.

At times, I felt that the characters talked to me, and I was merely transcribing their story. I also thought that the story was a metaphor for the healing process that each of the characters underwent and illustrated the power of love and friendship.

I finished my first full draft by the 26th of July and was able to hand a copy to Euan, much to his surprise. Despite a heart attack in September 2018, I completed the final printed version in November 2018.

The quilt remains unfinished, the ties still intact, while I am wrestling with my second book, *The Secrets of Ferncrest*.

What has this taught me?

It has taught me that you should not let age impede your goals, and you should not be afraid to choose a new road to travel.

Age is Real

Sheila GIBSON

Are you serious?

Is this topic a tease for seniors who are in denial about ageing or feeling invisible and ignored? For seniors who want to prove they have still got 'it'? Really!

AGE HAS A LOT TO DO WITH IT, depending on what 'it' is.

Context! Politicians and celebrities who have tripped into the spotlight unfavourably, often call out 'context'. So where to start?

As a senior myself; okay, I'm celebrating my 80th in September, I feel qualified to make a few observations from my life and that of many acquaintances – I'm sociable.

After a certain vague age it is a reality that there are less years ahead of us than behind. Hence it is not uncommon for us oldies to appreciate a bit of flattery to soften reality. We don't mind being told that we don't look our age, or our health is holding up well or that we can still puff at an exercise class. Some of us can even navigate computers and use mobile phones reasonably well. Many of us are trusted to mind grandchildren, even for sleep-overs. These activities and skills nurture our youthful image of our declining self.

But we hold a secret deep within – it all gets harder as we age.

Age is real. Ask any child, even a two year old 'how old are you?' and there is total pride in the sorting out of their fingers to announce the good news. Birthdays are great celebrations as one extra candle gets added to the challenge of the blowing-out test. I suspect that owning a bigger chronological number is possibly more satisfying than the party or gifts. *Age has everything to do with the celebration.*

Focussing on human beings, age *must* be important because of the part it plays in society. The minute a baby is born, its birthday is recorded forever more. Over and over again, age will be requested as part of the person's identification. As soon as we are asked to fill in a form there will be a section to record age. So what's age got to do with it? It might seem irrelevant at times, but it is usually asked, so get on with it.

Both a birth certificate and a passport record it. The Government knows who we are and how old. That's why people are invited to get onto the Electoral Roll to start voting and why we get a formal invitation to do certain medical tests like breast screening and poo tests, and the best one of all is when we age enough to qualify for a Seniors Card. *Age has everything to do with it!*

Our society also has traditional rites of passage connected with AGE. Starting school is determined by age. The joys of getting 'L' Plates and a Driving Licence are locked down by age. Also getting a paid job. Followed by the Big 18th and 21st Birthdays. Party time. *Rightly or wrongly, age determines all of this.*

Doctors record ages and occasionally glance at it before a diagnosis is made or treatment is commenced. Ooh, this is a delicate issue. Will the recorded age determine what treatment takes place? Some surgery cannot be done if you are over 80 – that's about the patient not the surgeon. During the Covid-19 pandemic, age was front and centre as society went into lockdown and younger adults advised their parents to stay home and keep away from the virus because 'you oldies are more vulnerable'. Once the vaccine was approved, age was one of the determining factors in its distribution. The oldies were at the top of the queue along with health-care workers and other such valuable workers in the community. *Age had everything to do with it.*

For once, it wasn't good to win the jackpot!

Age has everything to do with museums. It is a prerequisite that public displays feature ancient material. If the object isn't seriously ancient it simply doesn't get a home in a museum. The older the better. Little did the dinosaurs ever imagine how scrutinised their life would be. It is amazing how precious a few bones are, or a badly chipped plate from Egyptian times, or a papyrus scroll with huge bits rotted away and strange hieroglyphs written on what is left. *Simply amazing – and very interesting too.* Age is everything in this world of museums.

And what of fine wine or cheese? Older can be better it seems. Some bottles of wine should have been charged rent because they have been housed so long in order to mature. The owners would have doubled their profit between housing the bottle and then the sale, or even – can you believe this – an auction of the wine. *Age is the winner with some wine.*

Cheese doesn't seem to attract quite as much of my attention but really stinky ones seem to be the mature type that are worth more \$\$\$. It is all about the ageing process it would seem. Good quality cheese needs luxurious time to mature. You can't hurry this process. Ageing is everything in parts of the wine and cheese world.

Age has a lot to do with it. As we humans age I suspect we fight back at times when the rot is becoming evident. We don't like it being said that we are good 'for our age'. It's the quality of life that is more important than the numbers. Fossils can be valuable, eventually. Defence mechanisms?

However, at any age one can be grateful, forgiving, loving, generous, supportive, forthright, creative, and engaged with life. The older we are perhaps the better we could be at living out these qualities.

What's *your* age got to do with it? Your call.

Robert GILCHRIST

Looking pale and emaciated, Ruth stepped out of the lift to see the Mater hospital lobby crowded with people. The check-in queues were enormous, because of the mandatory temperature checks. Ruth knew it would be her last visit for a long time. Her beloved Jeff had drawn his last breath just an hour earlier, his long battle with prostate cancer finally over. It was time to head home and start afresh.

Her regular Uber driver greeted Ruth with a smile.

"G'day Ruth! Raglan Street for you today?" said the driver.

"That's right," she responded, "Just near the roundabout with Avenue Road." A flood of tears suddenly overwhelmed her. The night was all too fresh in her mind. She needed to sleep for days. She wasn't yet prepared for widowhood.

Grey-bearded Gus walked cautiously down the Raglan Street steps to the soft white sand of Balmoral beach. His replacement knee joint was still tender. Slipping on his thongs he headed for the water, thermometer at the ready. The early morning light illuminated the striking natural beauty of the pure white beach, as the swimmers entered the water. Eighty two year old Bill, one of the morning regulars waved at Gus and shouted, "It feels cold today Gus! What does your thermometer say?"

"19.8° today Bill. It's nearly 1°C down from this time last week. You'll feel energised in there mate!"

Walking back to his 'reserved space' on the beach, Gus carved the 19.8°C onto a one metre square of sand. His duty completed, it was time for his own swim.

Pushing open her front door, Ruth spotted her neighbour watering his lawn.

"G'day Ruth", smiled Peter, her next-door neighbour. "Would you like a coffee?"

"No thanks, I'm just heading down to Balmoral for a swim. Maybe later?"

"No worries!" said Peter.

Two weeks had passed since Jeff died. Ruth dusted off her life and resumed swimming daily at Balmoral beach. The sharp chill of the water combined with the aerobic exercise seemed to clear her mind of the stress and sadness of the last eighteen months. A short drive down Raglan Street brought her quickly to the beach. The autumn sky was a crystal clear blue. The sun illuminated a group of Balmoral bathers, as they dipped their toes into the water. Quickly disrobing and with a shake of her blonde hair, Ruth headed for the waves. She smiled and nodded at Gus as he wrote the water temperature in the sand.

By 7.30am, Ruth was ready to head home for a shower. Retrieving her ignition key from the exhaust pipe, she opened the car door and threw her wet towel onto the seat, before turning the key. To her surprise the engine didn't turn over. Catching Gus' eye as he ascended the Raglan Street steps, Ruth called out, "Gus, my car won't start. Can you help?"

"Of course," nodded Gus.

Ruth led him to her rusty old Fiat 500 and handed over the key. A quick turn of the key confirmed her worst fears.

"Your battery's flat Ruth," said Gus. "I'll call the NRMA for you. Are you a member?"

"Yes," she confirmed, searching for her membership card.

The NRMA service van arrived within the hour. It left just enough time for Ruth and Gus to get to know one another better. She discovered that he was also a widow. His wife Jane had died in a fiery car crash on the Spit Bridge five years earlier. Daily swimming had provided the escape and friendship Gus needed to move on from his grief. And his daily temperature check of the water gave new purpose to his life.

"That's fixed now," said the NRMA serviceman.

"That new battery will give you at least five years of service. It'll probably outlive your car!" he smiled.

Ruth turned the ignition key and the engine roared into life.

"Thank you both," she said to Gus and the NRMA man, standing proud in his smart uniform.

Nearly a year after Jeff's death, Ruth looked fitter and younger for her daily swimming. Gus' friendship had provided the salve to her grief. It would take her years to fully recover from her thirty year marriage, but she'd made a good start. As she descended the Raglan Street steps, Ruth noted the temperature carved in the sand -19.1°C today. Despite the rain and lower temperature, Ruth felt ready for her swim. Gus was already in the water and waved to her.

Shivering from the drop in temperature, Ruth settled in behind Gus for their daily kilometre swim between the bright, yellow markers. The ocean was dimpled by the raindrops. Patches of floating seaweed could be seen along the route, decorating the waves. As they emerged from the water, Gus suggested, "Can you join me at Kazzi for coffee?"

"Yes, of course," Ruth nodded.

"I have a crazy idea I'd like to discuss with you."

In the coffee shop, the smell of freshly brewed Greek coffee assailed their noses. A Baklava each provided the sustenance they needed, whilst sitting at a discrete table in the back corner of the coffee shop.

"That water temperature's a clear sign that winter is settling in," Ruth said.

"Yep, but you'll get used to it. The great thing about Balmoral is that 19.1 really is as low as it gets. Soon the water will be warmer than the outside air!"

"So what's this idea you've got Gus?"

"Would you join me in a 20 kilometre ocean swim at the Florida Seniors' Games in Miami next year? It'll be a great experience and a good excuse to visit the USA, if our borders are open. But more importantly, it'll prove that you're never too old for big challenges, Ruth!"

Ruth thought for moment, wondering what Jeff would have said. She could picture his face in her mind's eye. "Count me in, Gus," she smiled.

The Spinster

Peter GILL

During a trip to Batemans Bay in the 'eighties' I made the acquaintance, through my mother, of the most balanced, well-mannered, entertaining, thoughtful woman I had ever met: Miss Holtsbaum. Ex Australian Women's Army Service – a sergeant later lieutenant. Always erect, teeth flashing in a beaming smile and eyeball to eyeball contact. She struck me as a woman who would have the subtlety of a hand grenade in a closed meeting.

I adored her from that first meeting. No one discussed Ms Holtsbaum's past; that was her territory – a minefield for the unwary. Fortunately, I had been in long pants long enough for self-preservation.

"Call me Nona, dear."

Miss H. relocated, late eighties, to the Anglican Retirement Village (ARV) in Castle Hill, Sydney. My mother followed in 1994 whereupon I renewed my acquaintance with Miss H. She kept an eye on my mother and slipped me occasional advice.

After Mum died in 1997, I continued my visits to the ARV to have a chat with Miss H. She preferred I drop in about 5.00pm just as the fridge door opened for a glass of cask Chardonnay. Over the years we engaged in many useful conversations that stem from that hour. She even allowed me to replace her old typewriter with a computer, printer and Microsoft Word. Within a handful of minutes she was into it like a rat up a drain pipe – Chardonnay included.

One summer evening I commented my hope that these evening visits would not cause any gossip. "Peter, the place is full of old dears. Those aren't crickets you can hear outside – it's gossip! Just love it!"

Our common ground lay in stories from the past. She had so many interesting tales that I was saddened with their eventual loss. I encouraged her to record them using Word.

I stayed longer one evening dating some silver plate so she could identify the point of family origin. The tide in the Chardonnay cask was ebbing quickly. She long-chatted about growing up, relatives, friendships and eventually came to the war years (1939-45). "I was engaged to an Observer flying bombing missions over Germany; he never came back. My eternal dream is him being strafed after he parachuted out. I see him burning up – my cycling dream, year-in, year-out."

I phoned her one night feeling guilty that I had been preoccupied with work – 20 April 2004. The phone switched me to message bank. "It's your wayward boyfriend. I will call you in a couple of days." She died that night aged 84.

Miss H. scripted her own funeral dotting every 'i' and crossing every 't' with military precision. At the wake there were two circa 1942 photographs on a stand: a young Nona and her fiancée, Ernest Roy Moore. Nona's reminiscence from 12 months earlier flooded back capturing their moment in time and its subsequent loss. Among her possessions were all his letters to her, bound in ribbon, together with his photograph. She left instructions that the letters remain unsighted; they were placed in the coffin to accompany her final journey.

Two photographs left me with the recognition that I could never have perceived the intimacy of her life until its end. Nor living with unfulfilled expectation that replaced her life-dream with a recurring trauma. The substance of the letters was not a mystery.

I took advantage of Covid-time to revisit Nona's life through digital records, her correspondence archived from the loan computer, the Country Women's Association notes, her life memories and, finally, her trauma.

Moore had joined 158 squadron on 19 March 1944 following aircraft conversion training. Eleven days later, 30 March 1944, there were seven on the Halifax bomber that departed Lissett, Yorkshire, for Nuremberg. Only one survived: Flying officer Anthony Shanahan. His POW report stated: "Shot up by a night fighter [ME110]. Bale out ordered at 20,000 feet by Captain and all acknowledged. No one was injured until Nav [Ernest Roy Moore] had baled out and I was knocked unconscious by bullet through head. Five were still in the aircraft. Aircraft was out of control and on fire. Aircraft crashed about 10 minutes from Nuremberg. I did not see Moore (Nav) again. I was wounded before I baled out and unconscious until captured."¹

A story's meaning lies in why we are journeying someone's life. I have my memories of a remarkable woman who never fails to visit my thoughts on Anzac Day. Nona's story weaved the aftermath of war, a woman's life, her life choices and someone who wanted to understand.

Nona lost a relationship that she felt couldn't be replaced. She moved on fiercely independent and a complete person. Despite her age, she never lost sight of contributing to an earlier generation. Beneath the public persona she nurtured a sensitivity apparent the first time we met. That sensitivity gifted me something irreplaceable – insight.

1 <https://highgate-rsl.org.au/afcraaf-roll/bickford-douglas-fitzgerald-428902/> [accessed 29/11/2020]. A crew studio portrait is at <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P10322826>. E.R. Moore is seated third from left.

Twilight Thoughts

Lindsay GLEESON

What's age got to do with it? Well a lot, as the experiences of a lifetime made me take stock of my life now that I was reaching my twilight years, alone and for the first time in my life making my own decisions as to how to spend the rest of my days.

Deceptions both deliberate and unknown had a profound affect and lead to a far deeper understanding of human behaviour, forgiveness and just getting on with the job.

His selfish motives began when he no longer wished to be the centre of a perceived famous boxing career. Girls wearing bright, sexy clothing, outrageously high beehive hair, loud cheers and wolf whistles, appealed to his ego. Strutting down aisles to be close to their boxing hero and cheer him on, began to annoy him but he was their hero; someone famous to whom girls would flock.

This was in the late fifties when boxing was at its peak in Sydney and he achieved success. But now after a life so far committed to training, having no social life or fun, he decided it was time to take a short break and decide on his future; whether to continue as an amateur or enter into the bigtime of professional boxing.

He soon discovered they were not really his friends when they thought he was throwing it all away. They stormed out of the room in disgust and fell by the wayside as they moved onto their next target. There was one girl who had been secretly in love with him and relieved to think he was quitting. She really didn't like seeing her friend pummelled around the head in a boxing ring.

A night together drinking and making love in the back seat of his old Holden car resulted in the inevitable pregnancy. Kept secret from all her friends

including the young man responsible; her mother and grandmother moved her to another state and guarded her secret.

The young man then took a different direction and moved away from his friends to start a new life deciding he wanted to find a girl who knew nothing at all about his past. I was a naive and innocent sixteen year old when I met him and he was an experienced twenty three year old. We worked together in a service station and eventually married a couple of years later. Our marriage unbelievably lasted fifty-five years until he passed away. It wasn't always an easy life and at times volatile resulting in several separations. The many differences between us got in the way. The way we were both raised had been vastly different as he'd had no father figure as a role model.

Whereas mine had been a traditional family with a mother, father and brother. We moved to Australia from another country and this is where my parents faced many new challenges. Finding work, having little money and left little time for affection with their two children.

When I met him he fulfilled a need to be loved and to have some humour in my life. Getting to know him there was a casual mention about boxing but when he realised I actually hated boxing nothing more was said. In fact I didn't believe he'd been a boxer at all as he was small and slight in build, hence the flyweight category she knew nothing about. His love of sport was also a new discovery and once married he spent the rest of his years trying to convince me on the merits of sports and boxing. I disliked the brutality of sport and preferred the Arts – music, dance, theatre, literacy; all of which left him bewildered.

Four very headstrong and determined young sons arrived in close succession while my husband chose a life of working a seven-day a week business. He had very little time at home so discipline was left entirely to me. I found the task raising young children delightful and easy, but as teenagers my job became extremely difficult.

There had always been a longing during each pregnancy that a daughter would arrive, but this wasn't to be.

Then in 1994 a letter arrived that would alter our lives. A young girl searching for her birth father. After several hesitant phone calls, he discovered that this young girl in Melbourne was indeed his biological daughter.

The years melted away as they talked and got to know one another for the first time. She was a charming young lady with many personality traits and features like her father. It seemed ironic after wanting a daughter so much to have one enter our lives in this fashion. Nevertheless plans were made to visit her in Melbourne.

More deceptions....

Many years later into our marriage and an interest in genealogy brought forth more discoveries that were to change his whole world; all of which was unknown to him to this point. His elderly mother was in reality his grandmother and his birth mother was his sister who was sixteen years older than him. Then to discover his birth father was a famous Aboriginal Australian Boxer who died young.

He was now no longer the youngest in his family of six but the oldest in another family of six children. Relationships changed and his brothers and sisters became his half-brothers and sisters.

Now another deception upon his death. He had been two different people; the popular and loved one he showed outside world and a very different one at home. I had loved him and taken care of his many health needs over the last ten years, but we had drifted far apart. We didn't even have time to say goodbye as his life was snatched away.

Now I had to portray a grieving widow when in reality what I felt was relief that the most difficult time of my life was behind me and I was free to make my own decisions and start a new life.

Nana and Grandma

Loris GOOCH

My father's ancestors are lost in the mists of time, buried by family secrets and half-truths. When did they come to this land? His parents, my grandparents, held the secrets tight. They'd become part of the landed gentry, a position that my Nana viewed as demanding respect. My father said she would cross the road in Manilla and Tamworth to avoid people. "Don't talk to them, Bert," she'd say. "They're reprobates." I thought it an intriguing word when young.

Reprobates!

When I knew Nana, she was much older and they lived in Sydney, at Ryde. She visited us for Christmas and Easter with Granddad, a quiet man who talked country matters with my father, the price of wool, droughts and other matters. He thought Australia shouldn't bother with the outside world at all. Just exist within our own sphere.

Nana by this stage had tight blue curls, wore tatted collars and a small pill box hat on her head with a net coming over her face, stopping at her bright red lips. She'd lift the netted veil and offer us children a powdered cheek. "Got a kiss for Nana?" she'd ask. We always obliged. When they'd gone, we imitated her endlessly, using our fingers to lift the imaginary veil. It was the only bit of theatre that ever came to our market garden in the late 40s and early 50s and caused us endless delight.

My English Granny also came for Christmas and Easter. She was a staunch country woman from a small village in Cambridgeshire, Kirtling. She had a thick brogue she never lost and a strong streak of independence. She'd left the village as a teenager and went to London where she worked as a domestic. She then got herself a job as a lady's maid on a boat bound for Australia in the early 1900s and managed to get herself pregnant to the

purser. She arrived in Sydney pregnant and alone. A pregnant lady's maid was probably not the look the lady wanted. The purser later returned, they married and had four more children.

When I visited England in the late 60s I met her relatives who told me how shocked they were that Maudie had married a man so much older than herself. I shrugged at the time as I did not know. He was a widower and had five adult children in England, that I knew. They were the same age, and older, than my Granny. By my mother's account, he was a drinker and a gambler and left the family destitute although as she aged, she realised how difficult it would have been for him to have a new family as an elderly man. Granny worked as a house cleaner around the Eastern Suburbs in Sydney to support her four children. She was a determined woman. She told me travel was an education in itself.

Christmas and Easter were the two times in the year when we'd kill and pluck a chicken to be roasted for lunch. It was a treat to have roasted chicken in the early 1950s. For the rest of the year, it was baked lamb or beef for Sunday lunch. One Christmas I was seated between the two grannies. Grandma Gabriel had legs apart, knife and fork in hand and was tucking in to our traditional lunch, when Nana's voice cut across me. "Ladies always unfold their napkins before starting to eat," she informed my Granny in her high-pitched, clipped speech. Granny merely glared at her and continued eating.

Of course, no one liked anyone from their spouse's side of the family. My mother didn't like my Nana. She thought she gave herself airs and graces above her station because she'd worked as a barmaid in Tamworth before she married up and became a property owner. My father's sisters had attended boarding school, which left my mother seething

with resentment. No such luxuries came her way, her own mother struggling to provide for four children on her own in a foreign land.

My mother's father, Arthur Gabriel, was her *pièce de résistance*. Despite his shortcomings as a supporter, he was part of the British aristocracy, so my mother said. As proof, he'd given his three sons the middle name of Spencer and claimed we were related to them. So for my mother, in spite of her poor, lack-of-opportunity upbringing, she was descended from the British aristocracy. We were often reminded of this as we sat in our fibro house on a market garden, situated in a green belt that hugged the shores of Botany Bay with its swamps and mud flats, our childhood playground. We were the descendants of the British aristocracy and far superior to my father's once-wealthy, middle class family. I sometimes think I grew up in the middle of a class war in which there was little respite. There were always battles to be fought and won.

I have much to thank my mother and grandma for. They were not shrinking violets, but women who stood their own ground and expressed their own opinions. They were both working women and didn't fit the mould of the passive, cake-baking image of womanhood who wanted to step out into the world in the 1960s.

My grandmother set off on her own from a small village, with minimal education and a lot of courage, to journey halfway around the world. She had always wanted to return to her village when she was older but never made it. I went for her when last in England.

Heroes at any Age

Wendy GORDON

'At times of crisis, a nation needs hope and heroes', the BBC reported.

They found a hero, an unlikely hero, and through him they found hope. This humble man had a goal: to raise 1,000 pounds (\$1,370) for the National Health Service. Instead, he raised more than 30 million pounds (\$41m), broke two Guinness world records, was knighted by Queen Elizabeth, scored a Number 1 single, wrote an autobiography and helped set up a charity. His favourite saying was, "Tomorrow will be a good day!"

Who is this?

Why is this achievement so remarkable?

His name is Captain Sir Tom Moore, the hero needed by his nation – and he was 99 when he accomplished these goals. He volunteered to walk around his garden with his walking frame, with sponsorship to raise funds to help his country suffering dreadfully from the Covid pandemic. He had already faithfully served during the war. This was a little thing he could do to assist the National Health Service. People heard about his efforts and were greatly moved, and even though many were suffering financial hardship, they gave as much as they could. Captain Sir Tom Moore died recently, aged 100, after being treated for pneumonia and then succumbing to Covid himself.

"The last year of our father's life was nothing short of remarkable," his daughters Hannah and Lucy wrote. "He was rejuvenated and experienced things he'd only ever dreamed of."

What's age got to do with it?

Nothing.

He did not see himself as limited by age. He had a goal and set out to achieve it, and in so doing he became a world-famous inspiration and hero.

She is 91, and he is nine years old.

She is his great-grandmother, and he is her teacher. She has no computer, no smart phone, and does not understand technology, but every visit he shares family photos with her on his iPad, and helps her to play games with him.

He teaches her not only what to do, but how to do it, and how to develop her own strategies. He teaches her with gentleness, patience and care. She looks forward to each visit. The relationship is strong, filled with laughter and happiness for both.

What's age got to do with it?

Nothing.

He does not see himself as limited by age. He has a goal and sets out to achieve it, and in so doing a very small child shows love and empathy for an old lady whose days are empty. She does not see him as too young, at nine years old, to be a teacher.

The little boy was playing on his front lawn.

He observed the lonely old man sitting on his veranda, staring without seeing. "Mum, can I please go over to see Mr Johnson?" he asked her.

"Mr Johnson is sad because his wife died," replied his mother, "I am not sure he will want to talk with you."

"That's fine," replied the small boy. She gave him permission. He returned several hours later.

"Whatever did you talk about?" his mother enquired.

“Oh we didn’t talk at all,” said the little boy, “I just sat on his knee and we cried together.”

What’s age got to do with it?

Nothing.

He did not see himself as limited by age. He had a goal and set out to achieve it, and in so doing a very small child showed love, comfort and empathy for a sad and lonely old man.

She provides meals every week for the family whose mother died, leaving four young children.

Also for another lady who is busy helping others. She cares for other young mothers, again by providing meals, doing school pick-ups, and other practical help. She has three young children of her own.

She says her role is to offer care and support for those who are struggling. She sometimes struggles herself, especially now that she is working full-time again. Why is she working full-time again? So they can afford to supply meals and practical help to those who need it!

What’s age got to do with it?

Nothing.

She has a goal, and sets out to achieve that goal – caring for others is her priority. She is not old enough to retire and have time for these acts of humble service. But she is old enough to have wisdom, love and care.

Malala was the youngest, at seventeen years old, to ever receive a Nobel Peace prize.

She is still just a young woman of twenty-three. At eleven years old, in her home country of Pakistan, the Taliban closed her father’s school for girls – and she did not know if or when she would ever see her school friends again. At fifteen she started to speak up about the need for girls to continue their education – and was shot in the head by the Taliban. After an extended recovery she and her father established the Malala Fund to enable girls to have the opportunity for twelve years of free and safe education, working every day towards this goal.

She travels to many countries to meet girls fighting poverty, wars, child marriage and gender discrimination to go to school. She wants their stories to be heard around the world. Her fund invests in developing country educators and activists like her father through her Education Champion Network – and holds leaders accountable for their promises to girls.

What’s age got to do with it?

Nothing.

This young woman has a goal, and sets out to achieve that goal – caring for girls and their well-being is her priority.

It’s all about attitude. And love. And perseverance.

A purpose-driven life, or year, or moment in time, is enriching to the giver, and to the receiver. Any goal worth achieving begins with a single step. One is never too old, and one is never too young to take that first significant step.

What’s age got to do with it?

Nothing.

The Piano Lesson

Helen HAWKINS

The church auditorium is filled with light. A black Steinway piano waits open on the church stage. The church musical director, Nathaniel Solange is young and is waiting for his next pupil to arrive for a 4.00pm scheduled piano lesson. Merle is retired but spritely and arrives on time.

“Good afternoon Merle, how are you?” enquires Nathaniel.

“Well thank you,” replies Merle removing her gloves. “Beautiful day!”

“Yes, very pleasant. Let’s begin. Play the A minor and C Sharp scales, I’ll be with you soon, just off to make a cup of coffee,” remarks Nathaniel.

Merle plays her scales and warms up her fingers till Nathaniel returns with his coffee and sits on his usual seat to the right of her.

“Good work Merle. Now we have nearly mastered Chopin’s Prelude, Opus 28, No 4. It’s almost note perfect, I believe?” queries Nathaniel.

“Well I suppose so... I’m trying really hard, I am nearly there. It’s such heavenly music, but it is still tricking me sometimes,” replies Merle.

“Play the prelude Merle and let’s see what we can do?” Nathaniel responds. He sets the metronome to 60 BPMs, listening intently as Merle pushes her glasses further up on the bridge of her nose, relaxes her hands over the notes, waits for ten seconds to compose herself and then begins to play.

The treble notes are slow and descending contrasting with the regular chords in the bass. After two surging emotional sections and reaching halfway, Merle momentarily loses concentration and her place in the music. Her fingers slip and make mistakes. People gather outside the church to listen to the eternally exquisite music. Merle finishes relieved, relaxes, exhales. The metronome stops. People move on.

“Well done Merle!” Nathaniel announces, complementing her. “Just a little polish needed here and there. We’ll write some fingering above the arpeggio notes and translate the Italian directions and I’m sure you will conquer your Atelophobia next time you perform.”

“Do you think I can get over that? My nerves are pretty fraught before a performance and I avoid performances altogether. You know about my stage terrors, your mother told you. We were really good friends and met at church. She helped me a lot, but I’ve never properly come to terms with that traumatic experience I had as a young girl.”

“Stage fright is common Merle, fear of making a mistake, freezing, holding the breath, panic definitely undermines a performer leaving one vulnerable to making mistakes,” explains Nathaniel. “Firstly breathe deeply, sit upright, excellent posture is necessary, mastering the fingering and practise, practise, practise. Focus only on the music and let the music engulf you. Let’s get to work.’

With the fingering mastered, the arpeggios are now more fluid and easier to play. Nathaniel and Merle translate. ‘Smozano’ means, play slowly, softly, fading out and dying away at the end.

Merle realizes now why Chopin called this piece 'Suffocation' or 'Tears from the Depths of Despair in a Damp Monastery'. She also realises how appropriate this piece is in Covid times as Covid suffocates its victims. Chopin also died from a breathing problem, Tuberculosis. This realisation also gives her insight into her own breathing problems and how her terror stops her breathing. She must breathe properly and try really hard to remember that by breathing, not freezing, by putting her nerves aside, she will succeed.

"I think you have mastered this piece Merle. Will you to perform it at my mother's memorial service this Sunday in the church please?" Nathaniel asks invitingly. "She adored that Chopin Prelude, it was her favourite. It was played at Chopin's funeral too at his own request. Mum succumbed to Covid too." Merle couldn't really refuse and promised herself she would enjoy the special rapture of this piece even though she had not performed publically since she was nine and with Nathaniel's assistance, she was sure she had mastered her nerves.

Merle practises relentlessly all week and is ready to perform on the Sunday following. She chose to wear a simple black dress, black shoes and a gold locket. Her greying hair is arranged tastefully and that following Sunday, Nathaniel welcomes her and the guests to church. There they gather to remember and give thanks for the precious life of Nathaniel's mother. Beside the piano is a vase filled with pink rosebuds. Following the service, guests chat amicably and sip icy lemonade from ornate crystal glasses. Next the music begins with a number of performances from Nathaniel's students. It's Paul's turn next then hers.

Sitting at the Steinway, ready to begin, Merle freezes, immobile, flashing back; she's nine again, about to perform in a ballet concert in front of a large crowd at the Rockdale Town Hall. Crouching down in a large pink paper rosebud in her white satin and tulle tutu, she waits for the music to begin. The music strikes up, the audience holds its breath and so does young Merle. The petals are high and she can't negotiate them. It's agony on both occasions, there and here at the piano. Suddenly Merle points her toe determinedly, crushes the petals down and dances, entrancing the audience with her improvised magical performance. Somehow she finishes, the audience clap and her dancing teacher hugs her.

Following that trauma, ballet lessons were cancelled. Merle began piano lessons instead. Now she sits frozen terrified holding her breath at the Steinway, remembering the rosebud fiasco.

Finally Merle remembers to tell herself, 'Breathe deeply, Covid suffocates ... now breathe! breathe! ... pray! ... breathe.' The panic subsides. The heavenly prelude begins to flow through her fingers and the audience is transfixed, engulfed till Merle plays the final chords and jubilantly nods to Nathaniel's and the audiences' appreciation.

At eighty, Merle smiles proudly and Nathaniel whispers while handing her the pink rosebuds, "Merle you're naturally gifted, age is no barrier, neither is Atelophobia any more, congratulations! People really appreciate your special talent. Thank you, God Bless."

Can You Run

Gail HOUGHTON

“Can you run”?

What does that mean, can I run? I’m filling in a waiver form assuring the company my family won’t sue them if I come to grief on the foothills of the Annapurna range in the Himalayas. Can I run?

Barmy! Back in the four-wheel drive we took a track which looked fit for only mountain goats, or is it mountain sheep here? Pebbles then scree, rocks and now boulders that we negotiated around or over.

The summit however, was not rocky but a grassy expanse. A flat slope overlooking the valley below. In the distance was the town of Pokhara and the extent of Lake Phewa. The second largest town and the second largest lake in Nepal.

The gear was unloaded from the four-wheel drive. Others had arrived before us and their gliders were laid out on the grass, looking like colourful silk worms with multiple strings disgorging from their bodies. I watched as the riders took up their harnesses and stepped in, the straps wrapping around their bodies like swaddling clothes. A gentle breeze shook the sluggish forms and they began to take shape with the captured air.

Watching the shapes fill with air, the riders began to run to edge of the cliff. With a leap of faith, they dove over the edge. The descending sail opened to capacity as the wind filled it, and then it began to rise gently, almost in slow motion. With twists of the strings the riders rose higher and higher with the currents of the air.

It looked easy, but was it?

I was definitely the oldest person here. No wonder they asked me if I could run. It was a prerequisite to flying!

It was my turn. My sail had been expertly laid out, my Nepalese rider stepped into his harness and motioned me over. There was a bit of a language barrier but he managed to get me into the harness, I was wrapped as safe as a new born. He conveyed instructions of what would happen when we were in the air. I was starting to feel a bit daunted, didn’t want to use the word scared, but I was bordering on it!

The instructions were in my head. After we took off, I was to sit back and let him do the flying. I was just to enjoy myself. (Tell that to the stomach!)

He yelled run, and I did but not fast enough. A false start. In my nervousness I began to laugh hysterically – he looked aghast! We tried again, and this time success.

What a feeling – firstly, after leaping over the cliff, we began to descend, my bottom automatically settled into the harness. Our combined weight took us down quite a worrying way. Then, with the sail completely filled we began to rise. Words could hardly describe the feeling; it was just like sitting in a swing as you moved. We went higher, the view was spectacular. As we were climbing clouds drifted by – ribbons of visible mist. When they touched my face, it was like a silken caress of a lover, so gentle, so sensual, so ethereal.

The silence was deafening. Having been a deaf teenager, only achieving hearing when I was seventeen, 'deafeningly silent' is real for me, and in this situation, a welcome state. No sound could detract from the wonders I was feeling and seeing. Suspended above the earth, moving at the will of the wind currents – magical. The Himalayas, in their beauty and majesty, so close. The birds of prey, silent beside us, scanning with their incredible eyesight. I could just make out some buildings way down below, never could I see a small animal at this height.

We glided through the atmosphere in a pendulous motion, the silken ribbons of cloud teasing us with their touch. Nothing prepared me for this, the gentleness of flight, the silence, the views, the touch, it was heavenly.

"Sh@#!" my rider exclaimed in English as we began to twist and turn quickly, the strings wrapping around themselves. No good getting hysterical! I just let him deal with the problem and hopefully he could untangle us quickly and return to the gentle flight, not an ominous fall to the ground! He expertly tugged on this and that and we were back to the gentle pendulous movements again. A rogue current had hit the sail and pushed it too quickly. I was glad of his expertise and also glad I didn't compound the incident but managed to remain calm with trust that all would be well. The stomach again settled. We returned to the euphoric feeling; the incident almost forgotten as quickly as it happened.

The time to descend came all too soon, I felt I could fly forever. I felt timeless, invincible. A few tugs on certain strings saw us heading for the landing area, a grassy patch beside Lake Phewa. We flew over the lake quickly, my feet seemed centimetres from the water, suddenly the grass was beneath our feet. My feet touched the solid ground.

"Run!" yelled my rider.

I tried; momentum was carrying us from the lake's edge further to the grassy knoll. I got the giggles and could not run another step. Collapsing in a heap he landed on top of me, also laughing. Quite possibly we resembled mating tortoises, which made me laugh even more as the image crept into the consciousness. We were in a tangle of lines and harnesses; the sail was trying to recapture the dying breeze as we held it firm with inert bodies. We began scrambling to free ourselves of the paraphernalia. It took a while to disentangle and get 'land legs' again. I looked up towards the mountain side where I first leapt over the cliff, so far, so high. The space between there and here was unimaginable, almost indescribable sensual pleasure. Magical.

"Wow, I flew, I flew..."

You're never too old for adventure!

The Bunch of Violets

Beverley HUDSON

Nan observed the preparation for the party tonight – her's and Roger's fiftieth wedding anniversary. It would be a grand affair with excellent wine and good food yet Nan was thinking about those fifty years. Many bumps and ups and downs but they had been lucky and tonight friends and family would all come to enjoy the party and offer congratulations.

She sat down and let her memory take her back to the early years of their marriage before she and Roger became old – she hated to admit they were old!

They had met at work. He was an up and coming lawyer. Nan worked in the office. He remembered the first time he saw her. He had stopped and looked at this young girl with remarkable blue and violet eyes and a wonderful smile. It took time before he asked her out and then they were a couple and spending all their time together, both having that wonderful feeling of being in love. Roger bought Nan little bunches of violets as they matched the colour of her eyes and one day as he presented her with the violets he surprised himself by just saying, "Will you please marry me?"

They were married in a small country town. Everyone was there and Roger vowed that one day he would work hard to be able to give her all the gifts he wasn't able to afford now.

They had a one bedroom flat below street level. They worked hard and every year on their special anniversary he gave her a bunch of violets although money was scarce.

When Roger was successful as a lawyer, times changed. Nan enjoyed the social scene of success and life was dizzy and fast. Roger worked long hours and would eat at the club and Nan was on the committee of a couple of charities. She was a social success and so they were both busy. They entertained and were good company so they had a very active social life. Times were good and Nan was spoilt with the presents success brings. There was no time to pause to look at what they may have lost along the path of achievement and success. Long gone were the bunches of violets. They were in the past when they were poor and young yet Roger stopped and bought a bunch of violets.

It took time to be successful so age had caught up with them and they were changed. Was there any sign or spark of what they had in their youth? Roger still loved Nan. Age had made no difference yet Nan was always trying to undo the ageing process. Would it be too late to find the happiness they had together? Youth could not be returned but the spirit of youth could be re-lit.

Nan thought about the night and how success had somehow not bought the happiness they had earlier; they were both so busy. There was no time to get off the social swirl and she wondered what present Roger would give her tonight? A new car? Another piece of jewellery? Everyone at the party would be waiting to see what the gift would be. There would be speculation.

The party was in full swing and somehow the topic turned to what was your best moment in your life? Your first yacht! Your first big fish! Your first overseas trip! Then it was Nan's turn. She looked at Roger and dreamily said, "My greatest moment was when I was given a bunch of violets!"

There was stunned silence around the groups of guests, then amazement. They all talked at once and pretended they had not heard.

Slowly, Roger left the terrace and quickened his pace to the study. He picked up the violets still wrapped in tissue paper. Heart thumping wildly as it was 30 years ago, he walked out to the terrace up to Nan and he pinned the bunch of violets onto her white gown. "Happy anniversary, darling."

There were tears in Nan's eyes as she turned and buried her face in the violets and as Roger looked down at her he realised, with a feeling of gratitude, that for him and Nan, age had nothing to do with love. They had found what they had in their youth. The happiness was still there and he rejoiced in their life together.

A Man's Work

Leonie HUGGINS

2003

"Just a little sting. If you could count backwards from ten for me now." The anaesthetist loomed above him in her blue scrubs, needle in hand. "Ten, nine, eight, seven..."

1943

Bobby raised his hand to knock on the door of the headmaster's office. Courage deserted him and he lowered it again. His mind was a riot of imagined misdeeds. He trembled.

"Go on, then. Knock. He said to come straight away," the prefect who had fetched him from his classroom shoved him from behind. "Go on, or we'll both be in strife!"

Bobby was surprised to see his father. "Hello, son." Dad placed his hand on Bobby's shoulder. "I'm afraid I've got some bad news. Now your brother has enlisted we need you at home. We've tried to get help, but all the young blokes are off to the war. Your Mother isn't too happy about the idea, but I can't manage on my own."

Mr Watkins walked from behind his desk to shake Bobby's hand. "We will be sorry to lose you, Robert," he said. "Under normal circumstances I would argue that you are too young to leave school. However, these are difficult times and we must all do our bit. I'm prepared to make an exception in your case."

Bobby struggled to keep his face suitably solemn. He wanted to cheer. He hated boarding school with its prefects, bullies and bashings. He was going home!

The setting sun lit the Western horizon with a tangerine and purple arc. In the yard the horses stood patiently, their tails swishing the flies that buzzed around fresh dung. Bobby worked

methodically, calling each horse by name and speaking in a low voice as he released the harness that fastened them into the team. They'd done a hard day's work pulling the plough and headed straight to the trough as soon as they were free, taking in long gulps of water.

Dad scattered bales of rich wheaten hay on the red dirt. The horses whickered and pushed, vying for the best spot and munching loudly. Bobby gentled old Poppy, stroking her flank before bending her lame leg to check it.

Dad leaned against the wooden planks of the shed, pulled out a pouch of tobacco and rolled a thin cigarette in fine white paper, licking the edge to secure it. The match flared orange as he lit up and drew in. "Ahh, that's better," he said.

Bobby watched enviously. He wanted one too. Dad didn't know that the boys had smoked behind the toilets at school. He pushed back his hat and a pale band of skin showed below his hairline. The remainder of his face was browned by the sun and a layer of dust.

"You're real good with the horses, boy! I'll say that for you. You're a natural." Dad puffed on his smoke. "It's a Godsend you can work them now this bloody war means we can't get fuel for the tractor."

Bobby basked in the praise. His older brother Bill had always been the clever one. Now he was away in New Guinea fighting the Japanese and Bobby was the one at home. The work was hard and the hours long, but he was happy. Well, he would be happy, if he could just take a drag on a cigarette.

Dad flicked the butt away before it burnt his fingers. He reached into his pocket and began the process of rolling a new one.

"Hey, Dad! Can I have one of those?" Bobby amazed himself with his own daring.

"What? A rollie?" Dad looked at him appraisingly. "Well, I can't see why not. Reckon you deserve it after a hard day's yakka. Best not tell your mother though."

"Here," Dad caught Bobby's attention. He wedged the papers into the side of the tobacco pouch and threw it into the air. "Catch!"

Bobby caught it neatly and put out his hand for the matches. He pulled off a wad of tobacco and rolled it expertly.

"Huh!" Dad watched him. "I can see you've done that before. What else did you get up to at that school of yours?" He paused. "On second thoughts, don't answer that. There's some things I'd rather not know."

Father and son stood in silence, smoking contentedly as they watched the horses in the gathering gloom. Neither of them saw twelve-year-old Margie come up behind them.

Bobby jumped. He dropped the butt of his cigarette and stubbed it out with his boot. He hoped Margie hadn't seen. She was such a tattler.

"Mum says tea is ready. You need to come in and have a wash."

Mum thumped a piled plate on the scrubbed kitchen table in front of Bobby. Lamb chops with onion gravy and mashed potato. His mouth watered.

"Get that into you. You need your tucker when you're growing and working at the same time." Mum served Dad and Margie and sat down to her own meal.

"I saw you Bobby. I saw you smoking!" Margie looked smug.

"Smoking?" Mum put down her fork. "That's nonsense!" She reached out and stroked the soft fluff under Bobby's chin. "You're not even old enough to shave!"

Mum turned to Dad. "Did you know about this? What's going on? At his age?"

"What's age got to do with it? The boy's doing a man's work. If he wants a smoke he can have one." Dad mopped up gravy with a piece of bread and chewed.

Mum clamped her mouth closed and stared moodily at her plate. There was no point arguing. Dad's word was law.

2003

"So, Mr Martin, the operation was a success. We inserted three stents in blocked arteries." The specialist looked up from the notes on his clip board. "Your condition indicates long-term smoking. May I ask when you started?"

Bobby leaned back against the crisp hospital pillows. "I was thirteen," he said. "I was doing a man's work. It was my reward."

A 21ST Century's Pilgrim's Progress

Lorraine JAMES

They were bowling down the M-1 now. Where was the next stop? Hannah couldn't be bothered looking up the itinerary. The whole of England was flashing past. York one day. Chatsworth another. Onto the coach. Off the coach. The little huddle of mostly grey and balding heads were herded through the 'Points of Interest', clustering around the tour guide, straining to hear what he or she was saying.

Nothing like her first trip to England back in '77 when she'd toured with Marcus. They'd potted. Hannah had the guide book and they'd only got lost once when they went three times round Exeter. But they'd ambled through sunken lanes between walls of petalled Snow – Queen Anne's lace and hawthorn. If they saw a sign that said 'Willow Under the Wallow' or 'Saxon Ruins' or suchlike, they'd make an impulsive detour and just *go there!*

They had driven out of London to Bath where they stayed on the Royal Terrace would you believe! In an apartment lent by one of their English friends. They'd strolled into town that first evening. It was May Day and the Morris Dancers were out. The Assembly Rooms were lit with candles and they sat and enjoyed a concert. They spent three days there, seeing everything, taking their time and then they set off down into the West Country – exploring at leisure. Then onwards up to the Lake District for several days and back to London via York and Chatsworth. A whole two weeks of wandering at will, so what was she doing on this coach – retracing steps?

Well, it was the family's fault. They had been horrified when Hannah announced that for her 82nd birthday she wanted to make her final trip to England, on her own and in Business Class into the bargain, and that she specifically wanted to go back to Kent. Her great grandparents had emigrated to Australia from there in 1862. But it was Canterbury Cathedral she felt she had to see one last time. The urge was so great when she let herself seriously think about it that she'd get a lump in her throat. Ridiculous really but it was all to do with her roots. Born in the Antipodes, nonetheless, the essence of her belonged there – in Kent. Ancestral records from 1500 placed her family in locations with ancient names like Lydd, St-Mary-in-the-Marsh, Broadstairs and Canterbury.

Finally the family had reluctantly agreed provided she joined a tour. By the time she had been widowed and was progressing at what seemed like a cracking pace through her seventies, Hannah had sworn she'd never do another guided tour in her life! She hated being theoretically trapped with strangers. By the time she'd been with them for what seemed aeons she couldn't endure another moment and to be fair, they probably felt the same about her.

Where were they going next? Ah yes ... Salisbury. Well, Salisbury was lovely but no doubt they'd dash through the Cathedral in half an hour max and then be back on the bus.

Oh! They were arriving. The party trailed into the hotel lobby. Room keys were distributed.

In her room Hannah sat down on the bed and suddenly the overwhelming conviction that she must escape landed on her with such an impact that she felt quite shaken by it. She stared at her suitcase, still locked, its contents undisturbed. She hadn't even taken off her jacket. She fished around in the pocket for her iPhone and Googled 'Hire Car Companies'. Several wouldn't take her. At 82 she was uninsurable. During one enquiry she yelled at the schoolgirl voice on the other end, "What's age got to do with it?" Eventually she was successful but not without paying a hefty additional insurance supplement with a softener that they would deliver the car to the hotel for her.

It was a merry little two door vehicle, bright red with a hatch back. Quite uplifting really! "Would you like me to set the GPS for you?" enquired the hire car man, loading her suitcase into the boot. "Sure." Hannah replied. She didn't bother to tell him she knew how to organise it on her phone. She drove him back to the hire car place. His knuckles were white as he gripped the sill of the passenger door. "Thanks a lot" he said, bolting back into the office.

Hannah, ignoring the GPS that he had set for Canterbury, used the exquisitely soaring spire as a guide to Salisbury Cathedral. She parked and strolled across the spacious lawns to the main door. She entered. Utter beauty! She wandered. She sat in a pew and drank in the glorious windows. She visited Lady Katherine Grey's tomb. She stood before the faceless clock. 1386! How *wonderful!* Two hours' later she was on the road, heading for Canterbury.

It was quite late when she arrived so she booked into a private hotel near the Cathedral. By this time her phone was going bonkers – Tour Company and family in back home trying to trace her whereabouts. She texted. 'AWOL. Sorry! I'm just fine. Touring independently. Don't worry. Will keep in touch.'

Hannah entered Canterbury Cathedral. It soared, this monumental masterpiece. Unbearable emotion welled up in her throat. After a thousand years here it still stood, the divine destination of the early pilgrims who, 800 years ago had walked through the mud of endless towns and villages to worship and honour Thomas á Becket. The modest candle was there on the flagstones, its steadfast flame marking his violent demise.

She sat, thinking of Marcus. She wandered in awe, relishing her independence. Other people's footsteps and voices surrounded her in that noble space, softly echoing the shuffling millions that had preceded them from the Middle Ages of Time. Her ancestral family had been amongst them. She belonged. She was fulfilled.

Tomorrow?

She'd head for Cornwall via all those ancestral towns and with a delightful detour to Sissinghurst.

The Tussle

Pamela JAMES

9.06 pm in the community hall where a bush dance is in progress.

You're not going to, are you?

Yes, I am.

But you're too old.

Don't tell me that. I don't want to hear it and I don't think age has anything to do with giving pleasure to a young boy. He wants to dance and so do I.

Look, whatever you say, you ARE old! Don't deny it. Look at yourself. You're a wrinkly faced, grey-headed old woman with creaky joints.

I know. But I don't want to hear what you're saying. You're only as old as you feel and I don't FEEL old! And I don't need you to tell me what to do.

Well, someone has to and I'm telling you, you're TOO OLD. He's only a boy. He won't want to dance with a silly old woman who's old enough to be his granny.

How do you know? He might like dancing with his granny. He put up his hand to say he needed a partner and no one was offering. So, I'm going to. I don't care what you say.

Don't want to see him disappointed.

How do you know you can still do this dance? Don't you think you've danced enough tonight?

You're getting tired, you know. Besides old joints can't take too much pounding at our age.

You'll be sorry tomorrow.

I'll worry about tomorrow, tomorrow. But tonight, I am going to enjoy myself, no matter what you say. What you don't realise is that I might look old to you, but I still feel young inside.

Oh, your stubbornness irritates me at times. But I can see you're determined no matter what advice I give. Just keep in mind the time you broke your leg trying to keep up with those teenagers on that mountain hike twenty plus years ago. It could happen again, you know.

But that was an accident. I slipped going down the gravelly slope. It could have happened to anyone whatever age. You know that. You were there, remember. You saw what happened.

Do you think it couldn't happen tonight? Falls are common, you know. Old folk are always being warned about them. I've tried this floor and I can tell you it is quite slippery. By the way, have you told 'the old fellow' what you intend doing?

Of course not! You know he doesn't care to dance and is more content to sit outside and chew the fat with anyone who wants to solve the world's problems. He won't mind.

Mm... I can tell you're in one of those feral moods of yours, and you're not going to listen to anything I say. Oh, I give in. Go on, GO! But let me tell you this: I think you're a pig-headed, age-defying, foolish old woman! It's past 9 o'clock and where you get your energy from at this time of night, I can't imagine. Now, go! I can see he's waiting and the music's begun. Get On with it, but do be careful! It's a very fast bush dance. You need your wits about you.

10.59 pm ... at home in the bedroom.

I warned you.

Please don't go on about it. Aw, my back hurts so much when I try to turn over.

The pain-killers will kick in soon. But you know you brought it on yourself. I did try to tell You But you wouldn't listen to me. Oh no, you wouldn't listen! You're so stubborn.

I didn't want to hear you! I didn't think it would turn out like this. The music just got faster and faster till everything became a blur and then ... I thought you were going to fall. But it was too late for me to do anything, and the little fellow had no strength to hold you. He was only eleven, you know.

How did it happen?

One onlooker told me she thought, that in the melee, you tripped over a large farmer-lad's foot.

Pity you hadn't been dancing with him. He would have been strong enough to hold you. Great muscly arms he had, as I recall! Good looking, too!

Then what happened? Everything's a blur.

You fell backwards, hit your head, and your back, according to someone I spoke to, and that was that. Your young partner was very upset. But he and his mum were reassured that it wasn't his fault. Just an accident.

I remember someone brought some ice. That helped. Oh, I can't get comfortable. My head pains, my back pains, everything pains. I'm aching all over. I'll have to try lying on my side.

Oh, why did I do it?

Why didn't I listen to you?

Well, you didn't. It's happened, and nothing can change that. I only hope you'll think carefully next time. I do worry about you. Often! Please try to get some sleep. You're keeping me awake and I'm so tired, exhausted even, and my back's complaining. It was quite an evening! Good night.

With the bush dance now in the past tense, the two drifted off into a ragged slumber, *Cautious Self* and *Adventurous Self*, tossing and turning, seeking ease. Subconsciously, the tussle of the night continued, played out in disturbed, pain-filled dreams. Who would rule on the morrow: *Cautious Self* or *Adventurous Self*?

By morning it was clear, *Adventurous Self* was very subdued, so *Cautious Self* knew that she could take control again. Well, until next time!

As Long as I have the Ability, I will just carry on

Wendy JANNINGS

When my younger daughter went overseas in 2008, she left her push bike and bike pump in my garage for safe keeping. Some weeks later in the garage looking for something, I noticed that the bike had an almost flat back tyre. I tried using the pump but could not get air into the tyre. Taking the pump to the local bike shop for checking, the problem was found to be mine for not 'burping and seating' the tyre valve prior to attaching the pump. Back in my garage, and following that specific valve advice, the tyre inflated. Despite having not ridden since my early teens and heady with my success at fixing the tyre, I decided to test my bike riding skills. So as a 60 year old I got on the bike, and spent 10 minutes of nervous energy wobbling up and down the foot path, proving that I had not forgotten how to ride. That was the beginning of good times to come.

Practising over the next couple of weeks and familiarising myself with gearing, I progressed to road riding around the neighborhood, then with confidence growing ventured two kilometres to the local shops. Starting to ride home with a shopping bag hanging off the handle bars, balance and braking became a problem, which ended up with me walking the bike and shopping home. Lesson learned.

The next day panniers were bought to carry shopping, and whilst at the bike shop I booked myself into a basic bike maintenance course. Weeks later I was cycling the four kilometres to and from work, combining my work with a fitness activity, whilst saving money and time. Colleagues were concerned seeing me on a bike 'at your age'. I never quite knew what they intimated, but they settled down when I kept arriving at work unscathed.

Not knowing anyone who rode a bike, I was apprehensive about riding solo further afield. As luck would have it, there was a bike stall at the local Spring Fair. After stating my case, the stall holder advised me to first try an Easy ride, organised by a bike club. Two Sundays later, I registered with 15 other adults on a so called 'Easy' paced 20 kilometres supported ride along the Harbour foreshore, which included crossing the Sydney Harbour Bridge. No one told me about the need to push the bike up 55 steps to the Bridge cycle path, that part was definitely not easy. I was pleased to actually finish that ride, but very tired due to spending most of the morning at the back, trying to keep up! Although happy to have found a cycling network, the ride clearly demonstrated that long distance practice was needed. I had my work cut out to improve.

Moving on two years and riding regularly, I had bought myself a lightweight road push bike for group rides and kept the other bike for local jaunts, shopping and commuting. Cycling was clearly becoming part of my life, I was unwittingly practising 'healthy active ageing'.

As I had always spent an annual holiday abroad, overseas bike tourism caught my interest. My first overseas cycling trip was in Spring 2012 in the Netherlands, on a canal bike-barge. Each morning after breakfast on board, the 12 riders disembarked with bikes and set off with the guide into the flat countryside, meanwhile the barge moved further on. Daily we rode past fields of seemingly endless rows of flowers and through old cobbled towns and gazed in awe at majestic windmills, water courses and working dykes. Each day ended by finding our barge at a new canal mooring. Since that trip I have

cycled in Central and Eastern Europe, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam; memorable experiences. In NSW during the Covid-19 pandemic, riding in small groups was permitted but international holiday travel was not, so time is now being spent seeing more of my own country.

After retiring from work at the age of 70, I became an accredited NSW Ride Leader. This volunteer role enables leaders to give back to the bike clubs by supporting, organising and leading rides for their members, and advocating through the clubs for safer cycling. A definite plus to the role is meeting like-minded people. It is my experience that this fraternity has a tendency to sit around in cafes enjoying the ritual post ride coffee and talking about all things bike related. I like the style, and am pleased to be part of it.

Other than leading rides, nowadays I choose to cycle with senior friends, a *pedalling mateship*. Our ages are of no concern, it is riding ability that counts. Regularly cycling is keeping us socially and physically active and according to the sporting literature – slowing down our ageing process! Even so, age related changes are inevitable and adaptations may be required. For instance, I now need to rest longer to recover after a hard ride, and as my reflexes are slower I practise defensive cycling, including being more alert of my surroundings and wearing high visibility clothing. If and when the hills appear to be getting steeper and distances more challenging, rather than give up, my plan is to switch from my push bike to a battery assisted bike to keep me riding comfortably into the future.

Thirteen years ago having no regard for my age, I got on a bike after a 46 year break – it was a positive exercise. That *humble* bike offered so much, a whole new world opened up to me. Incorporating bike riding into a lifestyle, engendered great experiences and friendships, both at home and abroad. Now as a 73 year old with cycling leadership skills I have come far, but there are still must-do rides and must-see places beckoning. A bike is classless, and cycling is a simple pleasure, so *whilst I have the ability to ride, I will just carry on.*

Penguin Passion

Teri KEMPE

Everyone knew my mother was a little crazy. She was one of those passionate, volatile individuals who could not have a discussion, rather she ranted until everyone either left or wholeheartedly agreed with her.

Soon after arriving in Australia my parents, wanting to explore the whole country, signed as volunteer bird spotters for the Atlas of Australian Birds.

Each weekend they loaded up their campervan and disappeared into the bush to count birds. They would rave about the great variety of birds they saw. Crawling on their bellies, stock still, hiding in the undergrowth, they lay in wait for an unsuspecting bird to cross the lens of their binoculars. They carefully completed complex monitoring forms, counting how many of each species, the markings, colour, habits and environment of the birds they spotted. Frequently they could not identify the bird they saw, sometimes they were able to photograph them.

Running between 1977 and 1981, volunteers like my parents submitted nearly 90,000 surveys, comprising over 2.7 million bird records. The analysed data allowed us to know where birds occur and track changes in bird populations across the country. Originally all records were made manually, but of course today the same project is processed through an electronic application.

After Dad died Mum went even more 'green'. She embraced the environment, birdlife, native animals and Aboriginals to exhaustion. She also became a vegetarian – at least when anyone was looking. Her passion for nature was relentless. She studied, rescued and volunteered to conserve, particularly

native species. She protested whenever a habitat was threatened. She became politically active in local elections when she felt a need to protect the environment. When that did not work she wrote petitions and agitated for funds.

Despite her regular voluntary commitment to the local Neighbour House and her new Aboriginal friends, from whom she learnt a great deal, her all consuming passion was the Fairy Penguin, now renamed the Little Penguin.

My mother first met her penguin family on Phillip Island in Southern Victoria. During the summer months she frequently attended the nightly Penguin Parade at Summerlands. Although now it is highly developed as a tourist attraction, originally it was simply a few planks of wood near the site where the Little Penguins made their ungainly march up the beach to their burrows each night.

Summerlands is home to around 32,000 Little Penguins and is the largest colony in the world. As they are a critical part of the ocean ecosystem, they are regarded by scientists as a bell-weather of the ocean's good health. My mother joined an environmental group studying them. In 1976, with two others, she spent ten days searching nesting colonies in south-west Victoria and over the border into South Australia.

Many nights she could be found with her hand in their burrows, avoiding a nip, to put an identifying band on them. Some days when it was icy cold, she rugged up with scarf, beanie and thick padded jacket, braving the fierce Antarctic wind to count the young and ensure all were in good health.

Penguins are excellent swimmers, their oiled feathers keep them warm in the cold ocean. Their strong flippers propel them at alarming speeds, enabling efficient fishing. In the summer it could be as late as 10.00pm before the Little Penguins made their long trek up the beach to their burrows. Having fished all day, by the time they returned to the beach they were tired and full of fish to be regurgitated for their young. These cute little animals made a spectacular display, some, in their haste, losing their balance and tumbling in the sand, much to the amusement of the spectators.

Around 1993, when she was 75 years old, my mother embarked on the craziest adventure of all. She joined a banding party to be dropped by helicopter on a remote Bass Strait island to count and band its penguin colony. My mother was never keen on flying at the best of times so it must have taken considerable courage to accept this challenge. As the penguins were away fishing all day and the party needed to first locate and then monitor the burrows in a remote part of the island, the banding party needed to stay several nights. They camped in the wild, windswept wilderness, thousands of kilometers from civilization, just for the love of Little Penguins, and to increase scientific knowledge of these fascinating and exquisite birds.

Such exploits carried out by volunteers all over Australia not only add to the rich fabric of their own lives but add immeasurably to our knowledge. Most are unsung heroes who sacrifice their personal pleasures to provide a small piece of the puzzle. Every little piece is invaluable in providing a clearer picture of the amazing world in which we live.

It was evident age was no barrier to my mother trying new experiences to accomplish something, even if she was not always successful or could not achieve the results she hoped for. I remember her giving me a book in my teenage years called: 'Let me die with my boots on'. It was the story of an aid worker in the London slums who, despite fierce opposition, relentlessly followed her passion of assisting homeless drug addicts to rehabilitate.

My mother wanted her life to be fruitful right to the end. She was blessed with relatively good health, stamina and a bright mind. Her greatest fear was becoming a burden to her family by being confined to bed. Fortunately she was granted her wish and died suddenly and unexpectedly from a brain aneurism. And it could be said she died with her boots on.

Falling for Art

Stephen KNOX

“And the winner is... Syd-en-ee.”

That poor imitation of Juan Antonio Samaranch's famous announcement came from Alderman Joe Perotti, Mayor of Redmayne Council. He was presenting the awards in the annual Redmayne Art Prize and the 'Syd-en-ee' he was referring to was local man, Sydney Dent, usually called Syd, but never Syd-en-ee.

Syd Dent was of an age when you didn't fall, you 'had a fall', which is what happened to him. His wife April heard the crash and found him spreadeagled on the bathroom floor, one leg caught awkwardly under him and a trickle of blood running down his temple.

She made him as comfortable as she could until the ambulance arrived.

“Had a bit of a fall, eh Syd?” the cheerful paramedic asked unnecessarily.

Syd didn't see the need to reply.

The ambos whisked him off to be checked over at the hospital and he was discharged the next day with a stitched and bandaged head, his left arm in a sling, a nasty bruise on his buttock and advice to take it easy for a few days.

Syd was bored. He had never been one for daytime television but on day one with his foot up he watched an episode of *The Bold and the Beautiful*. By day three he realised it was dragging him into its web. He noticed he was starting to agree with Flo that Liam and Hope's marriage was unlikely to survive.

“You need a hobby young Syd,” said his mate Robbo who had called in for a visit.

“Yeah, but what? No one collects stamps anymore and with two brown thumbs there's no point in gardening,” Syd replied.

“There are other hobbies than stamps and plants, you old goat. What about art, you know, drawing, painting?”

“I couldn't draw a ticket out of a hat and as for painting I'm a dab hand with a nine inch roller, but that's about it.”

“Don't be so hasty mate. Russell – you know 'Rusty Russell' – he's joined an art class at the hall near the surf club. He reckons it's excellent. When he started he was all over the shop but the young teacher took him under her wing and he says at least his mountains don't look like hippopotamuses anymore.”

“Actually, you might have something there old mate. I've always wanted to draw; used to sketch racing cars and Spitfires at school during French lessons. It'd be good to learn to do it properly.”

Syd was more mobile after a few days, well enough to walk to the hall during an art class. He saw Rusty Russell – Syd thought his mountains still looked like hippos – and talked with the teacher, who luxuriated under the name of Daffodil, sometimes called 'Daff' but never 'Daffy'. He'd give it a go.

Daffodil gave Syd a shopping list and the following Wednesday he arrived for his first lesson replete with brushes, tubes of paint and his old grey dust coat from his days in the engineering workshop. She set him up with an easel and some art paper and asked him to show her what he could do. He drew a racing car.

"That's good Syd, but can you draw anything else?"

He drew a Spitfire.

"I was hoping for something other than your school boy doodles Syd; draw me an animal," Daff suggested, "and this time use some colour and add some scenery."

Syd beavered away as Daffodil looked over the shoulders of the other students. He was embarrassed with his effort when she returned to him.

"The tall animal is a giraffe, right? And is that a hippopotamus in the background?"

"No, it's a mountain," Syd explained quietly.

"Oh yes," the teacher said, charitably. "Let's try something different, Syd. Next week we're doing a life drawing class and we'll be using charcoal. You might find that more to your liking."

"Maybe I'm not cut out for art," Syd said finally.

"Don't be ridiculous, Syd. We've just gotta find out where you shine."

The next week Syd wandered down to the hall. There were more students there than he'd seen before. Daffodil met him at the door.

"Syd, we've got a problem. Our life model has called in sick. Would you do it for me? You'd be doing me a great favour."

"What, sit up there on the stage in the all-together while people sketch my saggy bits? I'm a bit too old for that, Daff," Syd replied. Actually he was quite chuffed to be asked, but didn't want to sound too keen.

"What's age got to do with it? You're a fine looking man Syd, strong jaw, broad shoulders. Besides, we'd have you discreetly covered so no one would see anything they wouldn't see at the beach. All you've gotta do is sit still. And there's a bottle of red in it for you at the end."

"Well, what the heck! I'll give it a go."

Syd changed in a vacant office, donned a robe and ventured out. The teacher introduced her model to the students and settled Syd on a stool, draped a length of light fabric over his lap and removed the robe. He felt a strange sense of elation as a gentle breeze wafted in from the sea. He turned to his 'audience', smiled and adopted the pose that Daffodil instructed.

An exhibition of the artists' work was opened in the Civic Hall the following Saturday. Three of those on display were of Syd. He thought one of them made him look like a Roman senator, another like a confused version of Rodin's 'The Thinker', while Rusty's drawing made him look like a hippopotamus. Two of them displayed red dots including the winning entry by Jemima Robinson, simply titled 'Sydney'. In her acceptance speech she thanked the Council, Daffodil and everyone who supported the competition, saving the last for her "beautiful model who made drawing him so easy."

Pop's Perfect Pizza

Peter LANYON

Pop McPherson's grandson needed a part time job so Pop thought he would help out a little. He held open a newspaper as he made a phone call, hoping the lad was studying at home and not at uni. "Ronald, it's Pop... How's the study coming along?...Good, good... The local paper has a *Perfect Pizza* ad. They're looking for a delivery person.... Should I check it out for you? I've got the time."

"Pop... oh yes please! I've got three assignments due, but I really need a job."

Pop put down the phone and pulled on a tie. He told his wife he was just going to the shops. He drove slowly. He parked near the railway station, outside the popular pizza shop. He strolled in and asked for the manager, then waited. A woman in black trousers, matching tee shirt and cap appeared. She hesitated at first, but then answered his questions. "To work here you need a NSW drivers' licence. You need to be punctual and dress neatly. We wear black. Any problems?"

Pop shook his head. "No, none, thank you."

"Come by this Wednesday... four in the afternoon. It's a five hour shift." She glanced at his wispy grey hair. "Are you sure about this?"

On returning home he reported to his wife, "She thought the job was for me... I think I'll take it and then explain it all to Ronald."

Wearing his funeral trousers, his black shoes and socks, he was given a black tee shirt and told to wear it out, rather than tucked in. He was presented with a name tag and his first ever baseball cap. He was immediately ushered to an industrial size sink filled with hot water. The manager pointed, "There's your detergent, your sanitizer, some brushes and steel wool."

Pop gazed at some three hundred soiled pizza trays, all of which needed to be washed by hand, his hands. He squeezed into pretty pink rubber gloves and reached for a brush and only after two hours of standing on the same spot, did the manager call him over.

The process of making a pizza was complex and exact. He was given a checklist of ingredients for some twenty different varieties. He saw how the base was crafted, cheese sprinkled and how pieces of pepperoni and chicken and beef and bacon were counted, then artistically set in place. He then farewelled his creation as it began its six and a half minute oven journey, to be transformed into gastronomical art, to be sliced into eighths, slipped into a box and stored warm for the waiting customer or for delivery by car.

Eighteen-year-old Joanne, wearing a similar black cap, showed him how to ease the boxed pizza, with a side order of garlic bread, into their special, heat holding carry bag. She told him where to fetch bottles of Coke and to grab the shop's EFTPOS machine since the meal had not yet been paid for. "The customer's order, their address and phone number are all on this receipt. The car keys are over there. Let's go. They time us."

And off he went.

At the first house the customer was delighted, "Oh I love that cheesy smell!" He then added, "Nice of you to help out that young girl. She's lucky."

Three deliveries quickly followed.

Finally back at the shop Joanne sidled up to the manager. "He's great! He understands inches as well as centimetres. He drives really safely. He worked out correct change in his head! He's polite and chatty to children and he seems to know everyone! He knew the streets without Googling them. He brought along a real torch ... so much brighter than my phone.' The manager was delighted.

By the end of the first week he was telling his wife how, after calling out 'Pizza delivery,' he had negotiated locked gates, crossed creaking verandas, pacified angry dogs, followed bush tracks, been invited to pizza parties, sniffed strange smelling cigarettes and calmed irate customers'.

The manager noticed that Pop, unlike Joanne and the other teenagers, started just a little early and remained until he had thoroughly swept, mopped and then emptied all of the bins, regardless of the time.

He would clean the staff toilet without complaint. During flat times, rather than gossip about high school friends, he would refill the drink machines and assemble pizza boxes. The manager saw how he closed the freezer door tightly and not only turned lights off but put up a polite sign asking that everyone do the same.

"Yep, I can do that," the manager heard Pop say, over and over and it was to him that she now turned when the customer was likely to be difficult and when she wished to impress her visiting boss, the state manager.

Regulars to the shop would now ask, "Where's that nice man with the grey hair?"

Two busy weeks rushed by. Grandson, Ronald was finally able to say, "Thanks Pop, assignments all finished. I need you to tell me all about that job of yours. I'm ready to take over now."

Next day Pop gave notice of his intention to quit, news that brought a touch of genuine sadness to everyone involved with the shop. The black uniforms seemed to be worn in mourning. The staff watched as the manager reluctantly put a sign in the window, 'Pizza driver wanted.'

The following afternoon, Pop waited close by the *Perfect Pizza* shop as Ronald chatted with the manager.

"I see that your last name is McPherson." She studied his face, recognising something.

"Any relation to Pop McPherson?"

"Um yes ... He's my grandfather ... why?"

She then noticed Pop standing just outside the door. "We'll give you a job young man. You might not know it but you have an excellent family name."

She then winked directly at a grinning Pop. "Such a shame about your age!"

She then thrust a new black cap onto his head.

Age Does Not Matter Except for Red Wine

David LINFOOT

Last year I turned 80. Several people asked me 'what does it feel like being 80?' and I found this question difficult to answer.

Ageing is such a slow process, the changes from year to year are generally very small so turning 80 was not really a big step from being aged 79 years and 11 months. I certainly know that there are some things that I could do when I was 30 that I can't do now but I try to concentrate on the things that I can do, rather than the things that I can't do.

As we age, many of us become frightened of failure and therefore we are not prepared to try new things. Fortunately, when we were very young we were not concerned with failure. How would we ever have learned to walk if we had given up trying to take some steps the first time that we fell over?

We are told that there are two certainties in life, death and taxes. A third certainty is 'change'. Life becomes very difficult for those who cannot accept change.

Growing up, as I did during the Second World War, many homes did not have a telephone. It was not because they did not want one, but because technical resources were diverted to more important projects. These days it would be very strange for a person not to be able to be contacted by telephone.

Our Federal and State Governments seem to assume that everyone has a Smart Phone and a computer and some services are very difficult to obtain by people who do not own these devices.

What's age got to do with this scenario? Nothing really, there is nothing to stop older people from buying a Smart Phone and a computer but the assumption that everyone should have one is disappointing. I do have a computer, an iPad and a mobile phone, however, my phone does what I want it to do, send and receive text messages and make and receive phone calls. It does not have Apps and it does not handle QR codes. One day I will get a Smart Phone but I came up through the era when people saved string and brown paper, so spending money on something that I don't really need at the moment is not something that I do willingly.

Age may not be a major factor in how we use technology but for older people, having sufficient income can be a problem. Again, this should not have a lot to do just with age because there are plenty of younger people who do have to rely on Government and charity benefits to survive. It is good that in Australia, benefits are provided for people who need assistance but there are plenty of older people who can provide for themselves eg. self-funded retirees and not all of these people have been particularly high income earners.

Planning ahead is something that many people fail to do. Age does not really come into this skill either because we can start planning at any age. Of course many people do not like to think about the fact that one day they will be old unless an accidental death or a fatal illness intervenes. Perhaps the, 'live for today and not worry about tomorrow', is how some people prefer to live their lives. I certainly don't think that worrying about the future is a good idea but planning for the future seems sensible to me.

I can't share any stories of amazing feats that I have performed as I have advanced in years, but I do admire the many people who have achieved great sporting and endurance feats in their old age. My aim is just to do what I can, while I can.

My poor eyesight has restricted my driving ability but I now find that I actually enjoy using public transport. Fortunately, I live quite close to a bus stop which connects me to a Metro train and to a normal train station so I am not limited in getting around this great city of Sydney. I find the Sydney transport system very reliable and using a Senior Opal Card makes travel very economical. Planning a trip using the computer resources available may not be something that everyone likes to do but I actually enjoy the planning process.

Travel further from home is something that I also enjoy and while travelling as a younger person, I was quite happy to drive a camper-van around Britain and the Continent for four months, I would not attempt it now. However, for me, it is not a matter of saying that I am too old to travel, I think of how I can travel. The answer for me is that I can enjoy coach travel and let someone else have the responsibility of driving while I sit back and enjoy the view with no concern at all about finding the accommodation for the night. I know that some people say that as a driver, getting lost is part of the fun but for me getting lost was not really fun at the time!

Covid has temporarily restricted overseas travel but when things get back to normal, I am quite happy to consider travelling to other countries, most likely on an organised tour. I love cruising and when oceangoing ships resume operations from Australia I am quite happy to join a cruise ship. Yes, I know that risks are involved, but almost everything that we do covers some element of risk. For those who fear flying, the most dangerous part of an air trip is actually getting to the airport. The time on the plane is statistically the safest part of the journey.

Yes, I know that none of us will be on this earth for ever but what is the point of worrying about how much longer we have to live. Our age is just a number after all.

The New Job

Kathryn LITCHFIELD

It had never been hard to get a job before. A phone call, an interview to show your qualifications and 'when would you like to start, Nurse?'

It was the 1990's, I was 55 years old and I had applied for a position as a Community nurse in the Penrith Health Area. My sister-in-law was working in the same position, so I knew that they had not chosen anyone. I had sent my CV with a requesting letter. It was rejected.

I wanted that job. Sell yourself I was advised. I was fighting mad. I wanted that job. My second letter was more specific. I had all the required qualifications eg. General nursing, Obstetrics, Public and Child Health and many extras. I had been in a similar position before and as for team work, I had gone 'bush' with 150 teenagers as an officer in the Army Cadets. Hadn't I been in charge of a ward and taught nurses? There was nothing to lose. I let it all out.

The day of the interview I was before a panel of five and was given a list of scenarios to answer. How would you act if you or the patient were in danger in different circumstances? What would you do if? Decisions on the spot. I must have given the right answers, because I had the phone call the next day offering me the position.

The first week was supervised: baby clinics, school screening, home visits, dressings, even enemas. I had given enemas before some of them were born. With all my years of experience, I felt belittled by this level of supervision.

After a month I had my own patients and clinics. The second day, my fleet car had a flat tyre. I waited for the NRMA man. At last, sick of waiting I made a start. I took out the spare wheel and jacked up the car. I was just tightening the wheel nuts as the NRMA vehicle drove up. Even the three males on the team congratulated me. None of them had ever changed a tyre. I was accepted. I was no longer the 55 year old nobody.

The next year I enrolled in a Palliative Care course at Uni part time. This led to a position working with an elite team of doctors and nurses. I was privileged to help people and families on their last journey. I am interested in people, their stories and their life's journey.

Many of my patients live with me today. Not in a sad way, because life has its end in all nature, but as people who took me into their lives at a very special time and we grew together in amazing ways.

My career moved in many directions and the last years, up until I retired, was where it all came together. I had even met with a nurse I had taught twenty years before, who repeated to me, 'I remember you saying to the class, do not let this be the last of your study, go further'. She had just completed the Enrolled Nurse course at that time. Later she married and had children. When I met her again she had just completed her University Degree.

A wonderful moment for me. I would like to think that we are never too old to learn. If you enjoy what you do, there is nothing that is impossible.



Charlotte Judd, John Llewellyn Lloyd and John Dunmore Lang

Alle LLOYD

To me the currents of our lives seem like the flow of creeks and streams. Occasionally, the streams and creeks of this flow of time intersect, like the random but meaningful confluence of rivers, as they wend their various ways to the sea, where wave after wave of the tides are comparable to the passage of time: the day after day after day of our lives.

The current of the life of Charlotte Judd, aged 30 years, changed direction when she, spinster and lady's maid with 16 years' experience, decided, in 1872, to emigrate aboard the *La Hogue*, an emigrant ship that set sail from Southampton carrying migrants bound for Sydney, Australia, and return fully laden with wool and other goods for sale in the markets of England and Europe.

Charlotte had decided that her chance of marriage, children and happiness would never occur in the economic conditions of the England of 1870 and decided to look elsewhere, and, rather latish in life, on the far side of the world.

Her decision was a brave one, as her emigrant ship of choice was a windjammer that followed the Clipper Route to the Far East, Australia and New Zealand. This involved sailing around the world, west to east, braving the daunting seas around the Cape of Good Hope, entering the treachery of the Southern Ocean then, utilising the strong winds of the Roaring Forties in the sails, thereby gaining speed for southern hemisphere destinations.

The price for sailing this route was the advantage of less time for more profits but facing the hazards of giant and extremely rough seas, constant cold, icebergs, and a possible becalming in the Doldrums.

The *La Hogue* was in fact a fully rigged wooden ship with three masts and square rigging. The double fore and main topsails were already old fashioned and wooden ships were soon to be replaced by clippers, then metal hulled steamships.

Not only was technology changing to accommodate human greed, and its need for speed and the rapid delivery of cargo and emigrants to Australia and New Zealand. Transportation of convicts had ceased when Lottie was just 14, and, free settlers, assisted emigrants from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

The ship was a microcosm of English society with its capitalist owner vying competitively with rival ship owners, a strict class separation in the accommodation: first and second class cabins for the better off and steerage placements for the less well-to-do. Steerage was below decks and below the waterline, dank, dark and foetid and, in storms, frequently flooded remaining damp until the straw bedding could be dried and aired on a future sunny day, to try to eradicate lice, fleas and cockroaches. Influenza, pneumonia and dysentery were rife.

In storms, steerage passengers were locked below without light, with the ship rolling and pitching and creaking, continually flooded by waves crashing onto the upper deck and then rushing below. Candles and oil lamps were forbidden due to the presence of flammable caulking and tar.

Food, pickled meats and pulses, was often contaminated by weevils, and nibbled by rats and mice if containers were left open; and water was sourced from contaminated rivers in ports of call. Lidless containers frequently drowned shipboard rodents.

The current of the stream of John Llewellyn Lloyd's life had seen him, hating his step-mother and grieving for his dead mother, Patience. He ran away from his home in Liverpool, England to sign on board the *La Hogue*, as a cabin boy aged only nine years. As the son of a shipwright, the *La Hogue* in 1872 had been his home for 11 years and he was then a rigger when he had spied Charlotte Judd sitting on the deck at Christmas time alone, crying.

He was a young and handsome, sympathetic mariner but was forbidden by regulations from talking to female passengers so he, passing by, dropped a bundle into her lap. It was a knotted kerchief containing roast turkey, roast potatoes, sweets, dried fruit and a slice of pudding.

This same handsome seaman, later called on Miss Judd at the home of her rich relative in Millers Point, and, had disapproved of the household treatment of their new servant. To escape, he offered her 'marriage' and was accepted.

There was a rapidly occurring confluence of the currents of two lives occurring.

In spite of all of the hardships, both aboard ship and on land, Lottie and John were married, not in 1872 but in 1877, by the firebrand, pro-Australian nationalist and republican, John Dunmore Lang D.D. in the Scots Church, Sydney 'according to the rites of the Presbyterian Church'.

Lottie, skilled former lady's maid, presented at her wedding in a cream poplin, floor-length dress without a train, a dress cut fashionably Princess style, tubular and meticulously fitted to her body, with a high collar and inserts of cream lace at the neck and wrists. Her hair, without a tiara was curled and piled high on her head like the fashionable Princess Alexandra, who frequented the salon of Charles Worth of Paris.

John Llewellyn Lloyd wore his best black, woollen sack suit with a slim cravat, a frock coat and bell topper. His hair was oiled flat and he sported a moustache with a Van Dyke beard neatly trimmed.

John Dunmore Lang had commented to Lottie: "I dinna know you were living 'in sin' according to the Sassenach Law and that you had to lie about your marital status, or I wouldha pestered this great lunk ye marrying now sooner to make an honest woman of ye, the pair of ye having already two bonnie bairns! But better late than never! I know your husband is younger than you are but all marriage takes to work is a loving man and a loving woman, which you two obviously are. What's age got to do with it?"

Limit Me Not

Alan MACONACHIE

Every morning *he* would roll out of bed. As he did, he would recall how in the not-so-distant past he would have sprung out of his bed to greet a new day.

Hell, he was only fifty-nine and in spite of all of the effort that he applied to maintaining his physical and mental fitness, through balanced exercise, movement and food intake, he still had to fight a constant battle against pain discomfort, almost constant fatigue and a never-ending small expansion of his waistline.

Getting physically older sucked. He hated the increasing physical limitations that time was applying to his body.

He would become very frustrated with his body, its limitations and the way in which that body held him back. Sometimes he longed for days past when he could work physically all day or do a heavy training session, no aches, no pains, no discomfort, just pleasant fatigue. Instead, two or three hours were an effort. His body just would not conform to his wishes.

He did not hate his body. He just hated his possible future self that would not be able to do what he now could. He could not bear any thought that involved a possibility of not being physically capable or mentally efficient. He did not want to become a vessel that had no function. During his time, he had crossed paths with so many sad old souls. He did not want to become a doddering old fool.

Back sometime in 1974 during his association with a church youth group, he had visited a home for the aged, a place where people basically came to die. Each visit brought home to him his mortality. He stopped going as each visit became harder to bear. At such a young age he did not need to absorb these harsh realities of life, hell he was just starting out on the big adventure, titled: *This Is Your Time, Don't Stuff It Up!*

Then again, during his internment at a retail store he would come into contact with so many old and not so old members of the human race that were older, due to thinking old, than they should have been. There were also those that had a physical infliction that rendered them almost incapable of movement.

He saw these people everywhere, in shopping centres, at his place of work and in his mind. He vowed that he would never think old or be that way. He was not going to put limits on himself because of a number.

Older age was not an obsession but a catalyst that kicked him into high gear. It drove him to resist and fight as much as possible the cruel fate of ageing. He could not give in to it. If he did give in, then he felt that he may as well lie down and cease to exist.

Although he fought back with a vengeance against decrepit, his nemesis, there would be an occasional day when he would feel like not physically existing. Still he managed to drag himself from his bed and participate in the world of man-not-so-kind. Whilst participating in one of these downward mental malaises, he would do very little in a mental or physical direction; he would only be and function in a state of existence. However, he did discover that, on occasion, he could and liked to write when in this state.

After this type of interlude to his life passed into the realm of his history, he would berate himself for not using his precious time of existence in a more productive way. He had so many things that he needed or wanted to do. So much to do and such little time to do it in.

Why is it that when one thinks that one will have some spare time to do what one wants, something crops up that instead must be done? Even though he knew that it was not a fact, sometimes he felt that there was a sadistic being, watching his every move and just waiting to stuff up his life. You know, the weather turns bad for a weekend, something breaks down or maintenance work has to be done. It would have been good to have had a weekend where he could do what he pleased instead of feeling pressured and spending just about all of those days doing what had to be done. He would have liked a creative weekend now and again, a weekend where he could have pursued his interests. Until later life this rarely, if ever, happened. Even then it was limited by life.

During one of his non-existing periods of his life he decided that come whatever his existence was, even though pointless, now was his life. He decided to be happy and not self-miserable. He took a different approach to his existence. He decided to live more for himself and savour, as much as he could, each moment. He started to take back and live a life. He removed as many limits as possible from himself, from his thinking. He began to exist more in the moment.

This shift in thinking steered him into another of his many lives that were intertwined into his existence. He found a new direction that in a moment, struck him like a bolt of lightning. His life was becoming more acceptable which emanated in a more enjoyable and cohesive self. He guessed that it could go by the name of Ageing and as somebody once remarked, "You have to get old to learn".

Conversation with the Shed Owner

Gaynor MASON

The shed, your shed, the holder of 50 years of collecting. Untold treasures, some small, some not so small, but so much. Each item special. Why else would you have kept it? So much stuff carefully placed on shelves; shelves which were themselves collected from clean ups or garage sales, brought here to hold your treasures.

I believe there are items of value. Others are sentimental or just too good to throw out. One man's junk is another man's treasure. But really, what is this? I have never seen one before. Is it valuable? I wish you were here to tell me. \$20 or \$200? Who knows? Who can I ask?

Books, expensive books I remember buying for you. Books that are now nibbled at by rodents. No one will want them.

Wow! Comics from 1954. Now these must be gold. Superman, Spiderman and Wonder Woman. Did you read these? Did you enjoy them? I can't believe they are in one piece. Do rats and mice not like comic paper? Who knows? How can I part with them knowing you touched them close to your body?

Trophies of all shapes and sizes, so many of them for 1st place. How wonderful. Still, you never bragged, always quietly achieving, modest and humble.

Model cars, still in their boxes. Oh my, this one looks good. A Mack Truck by Franklin Mint. Google tells me it's now worth \$500, you only paid \$40. You loved Chevrolets and Dodges and would tell me, "If you can't afford a Dodge, dodge a Ford". So why are there so many model Fords? T Models and A Models. I remember you teaching me the difference.

Did you know the day would come when I would be asset rich and cash poor? You always said; "There's money in the shed". I knew you didn't mean cash. It looks like I will have to have a Deceased Estate Sale. How awful that sounds-selling off your prized possessions. You didn't care what I did with any of it once you were gone.

Did you have any idea how hard it would be? I don't think so. Perhaps you always hoped I would keep it all.

You loved your Grandfather so much. You would never part with his wood and coal yard trolley, and I won't either. This is part of your history. His picture shows a strong man in his 60's. Did you base your 78 years on his manhood? You are nothing like your father. I called you my rock, such a strong man. You never compromised yourself. A great husband, father and collector of ...

No, don't go there, the trolley can stay with its metal wheels. I will use it as a plant stand. Old chairs from your parents' home, painted red to look modern. Comfortable chairs, but so out-dated. Your Aunt's Glory Box. The Aunt who never married and was more like a sister to you. It must have held so many dreams for her ... do I let that go? Would you?

Your Grandmother's wardrobe: the one with the broken handle. There were no built-ins then, and so few clothes. Where will I find the key? Why was it so important for you to keep it? I know how much you loved her; and those apple pies and custard tarts she made for you. You were only 13 when she died, you told me how much you missed her. Do you know how much I miss you?

Endless unidentified car parts. I can hear you say
'someone might want them one day' but who?
Where will I find these people? Tools by the dozen.
Two old mantel clocks, both wedding presents.
One belonging to your parents, one to mine.
Filing cabinets full of old receipts dating back to
1963. Your first new car which seven years later was
our wedding car. So highly polished then, now it
sits outside the shed. You gave it to our Grandson
in the hope he would restore it. Mmm. I wonder.
You loved it, does he? Will it ever run again?

Magazines, radios, furniture, tubs of clothes, mirrors,
paintings, toys, sadness, confusion, regret, dreams,
tears, and 50 years of memories etched on my heart
and soul, all in the shed.

Sorting through all this is a big job that I can't deal
with today. I am too raw. Perhaps another day...
perhaps not.

I close the door.

It's just too hard.

Lucia's Story

Angelina MASTRIPPOLITO

Have you ever felt that you were too old to start a new life in a new country with complete strangers? If it were suddenly thrust upon you, would you embrace it with courage and imbibe the glorious newness of what it had to offer?

For this 83 year old woman as she lay in her bed, alone in her house unable to move, the thought of starting anything new was far from her mind. Her only thoughts were about dying. There had been words with her daughter, Ida. Stupid words spoken in anger. Words that spoke not just of what was happening now, but words that had stored decades of rage. Both women too stubborn to relent. And now at 83, she was alone in the house she had lived in for over 60 years, her legs crippled by arthritis in a cold, stone house in a small forgotten village in central Italy.

A friend stopped by to check on her and every day she stopped by, the more concerned she was that this woman would die alone and in pain. So, she wrote a letter to Australia to the woman's son and daughter telling them that their mother had been abandoned and her condition was dire.

There had been letters from the woman to her son and her daughter in Australia but the letters had not conveyed the awful inhumanity of the situation she was in.

She had not seen her son, Achille since 1948, when he left war ravaged Italy to find a new life in Australia and had never returned. Perhaps the memories for him were still too raw. Her daughter, Linda had also left Italy in 1965 for this strange far away land. A strange far away land with a searing sun and flooding monsoons and snakes and cane toads and the odd crocodile.

So, a plan was hatched to bring this 83 year old woman who could not walk, from Italy to Australia to start a new life. As the plan gathered momentum, the next few weeks were consumed with the frantic arranging of passports both in Australia and Italy. Linda would travel to Italy and take her mother back to Australia. A journey of over 16,000 kilometres for a woman whose life to that point had been lived in barely a few kilometres.

The whole sphere of her life when she was younger, had been walking to the 'campagna' every day to tend to her crops and her animals and gather the food for the evening meal. And when she got older, sitting in the piazza with her sisters and the other women from the town gossiping while they crocheted. This woman for whom the thought of change had filled her fear and kept her grounded in the same village, living the same life, in central Italy. She had seen her husband leave for Australia in 1927. For over 40 years until his death in 1971, he had implored her to come to Australia. But she never came.

It was a journey that would take Linda from Townsville to Sydney to Rome and then around windy roads hugging the majestic central Apennine Mountains to the East of Rome to a little town called Civitella Messer Raimondo, population 750, and then back the same way.

Linda would be met in Rome by Achille's wife's relatives who would drive her to Civitella to pick the woman up and drive her back to Rome to start the long journey back to Sydney. Then relatives in Sydney would meet her and Linda at the airport and take them home for a day to break up the journey. Then the nearly 3 hour plane journey back to Townsville. Not an easy task for my Aunt to take this

journey with a frail, nervous and at times stubborn woman who would have felt that she was being devoured by the complete upheaval that was now upon her. How helpless and frightened she must have felt as the car left her village and the life she had lived for 83 years. As the plane careered for lift off, how fervent were her prayers to her God.

The woman who had never left her village in Italy for 83 years would now arrive in Townsville on a Qantas flight in a wheelchair to be met by Achille, the son she has not seen for almost 30 years. Her son but perhaps really a stranger separated by 30 years of divergent lives. And then there were the others, the grandchildren she had only really known through letters and photos and others who she had not seen for over a decade. How bewildering to be welcomed by this sea of strangers.

I can only imagine how the north Queensland heat would have felt like a scalding iron to her frail skin. How bizarre the endless fields of sugar cane would have looked and how frightening the murderous sound of the curlews at night.

The woman's name was Lucia and she was my grandmother. It was 1977. I was 16 and she was 83. With the love and care of my mother and my aunt, she grew stronger and stronger until her legs could now support her with the aid of a walking frame. She grew accustomed to the climate and the warmth of the north Queensland sun. As she embraced her new life and imbibed the joy of getting to know her Australian family, her presence filled our house with a quite courage of someone whose life had at age 83 been completely turned on its head and gave us a connection to a heritage we knew so little about.

So, what's age got to do with starting a new life in a new country at the other end of the earth? Absolutely nothing!

The Rhythms of Life

Rosemary MATHESON

I'm lying in bed, drifting in and out of sleep, listening to the howling wind and driving rain. Suddenly – that's the way it always is – I'm awake! An old childhood rhyme rings out: "it's raining, it's pouring, the old man is snoring. He bumped his head on the end of the bed and didn't get up in the morning". My near-septuagenarian 'old man' leaps out of bed; no lying in for him, he is the classic Baby Boomer with a Peter Pan complex! In a flash, the lights are on and the kettle is boiling.

Slowly, very slowly, I arise, hobbling as my feet and hips work out what they're meant to do, and join him. We are on holidays, staying on an island dubbed a subtropical 'paradise'. The tourist brochures and postcards are filled with sparkling, sun-drenched images of sea and sand. Over breakfast I, as a computer literate senior, 'Google' the weather forecast on my Smart phone. The ever omniscient 'BOM' site just tells me what I already know: it is wet and windy. The map shows a huge 'blob' of cloud just where we are – our island has been totally engulfed by cloud and has ceased to exist.

Another 'golden oldie' worms its way into my thoughts. Cliff Richard's dulcet tones croon "we're all going on a summer holiday ... we're going where the sun shines brightly, we're going where the sea is blue ..."

LOL.

To while away the time, we play some table-tennis and by mid-morning the kettle is boiling again. The weather is still ridiculously close to cyclonic, so we break out our trusty companion of 37 years! No, not the dog; our Travel Scrabble, which, to quote yet another old song, has "been everywhere, man".

Delicious aromas start to waft across from next door as the resident Millennials cook up (yet another) exotic feast. They seem to have incessantly prepared and discussed food, including risotto, curry, home-made hoummos and chilli con carne accompanied by gin and tonic and bloody Marys. They even have a Mexican-themed tablecloth for tonight! We are having ham, cheese, and tomato on toast and ... another cuppa.

Suddenly, my ears prick up to an exclamation from the Millennials: "There's blue sky!" As I rush to the window I feel as though we are in an episode of Stargate and have emerged into an alternate reality. Sure enough, the cyclone has passed – for now – and the beach beckons. All else is forgotten. Heading to the lagoon it is obvious we are not the only ones taking advantage of the glorious break in the weather: Baby Boomers abound. At each turn they are there, walking, cycling, fishing, snorkelling, kayaking, ... keeping the tourist economy alive.

As I wriggle and struggle into my wetsuit I think of my mother. I'm sure she never donned either a snorkel or a wetsuit – not an elegant look for someone my age! Nor would she have resembled a beached whale, as I do, when attempting to heave my way out of a kayak. So, I ponder ... why do we do it? Essentially, I decide, it is because the Biblical three score years and ten is not a target – we all have bucket lists! We are desperately striving to counter the myriad of life-restricting conditions which haunt us, and we most definitely DO NOT want to 'lose our marbles' and become a burden on our children. We are, after all, busy spending their inheritance.

LOL.

Finally, dressed to impress, I enter the marvellous world of the lagoon. The water is fresh and oh, so clear. The coral is gorgeous, and the fish are a joy to watch. Memories of Steve Irwin jolt me out of my reverie as I swim over an enormous sting ray, but it is peacefully resting in the sand and I continue on blissfully, smiling, as several 'marbles' have been retained today.

Dry, tired, hungry, and satisfied we sit companionably in the restaurant and await our meal. The music is a Baby Boomer's delight, and we jiggle and hum along to a mix of 60s and 70s hits. As we listen to Don McLean's iconic "American Pie" a dismayingly morbid thought occurs to me. I said, "there will be a day when all the Baby Boomers are gone – what will happen to the music then?"

What's age got to do with it? At one level, nothing at all. There is so much we still can do and so much we still want to do. But tonight, we decide that the matter of age is now critically important, as we need to forestall "the day the music dies."

A Difficult Lunch

Sally MAXWELL

I am sitting opposite my father and I stare, unfocussed, through the water-rippled window next to the table. The coastline is shrouded by steady rain and the dismal weather conspires with the dreariness of the dining room to auger doom for our nostalgic visit. In my hands, the menu lies open and unread. I should be playing my part in this charade but I am not hungry.

"I think I'll have the fish."

My father growls with this as if it's a life sentence. It was *his* idea to come here but I'm not sure we'll make it past the soup. I blink back tears. Mum always had the fish.

Ten years ago we were a family of three, planning our annual pilgrimage to the coast. We didn't make it that year. We were blindsided by the aneurysm which took Mum. The teasing, joking Dad that I knew, stepped away and a sad, grouchy father took his place. I was surprised, therefore, when he phoned last week asking me to book lunch at the hotel where we always stayed. He said he wanted to mark the ten years since Mum passed and what better place than the Seaview? I agreed that the milestone deserved commemoration but silently wished it was anywhere else.

The hotel menu doesn't lie. I remember the turquoise ocean depicted on the cover, with its white-capped waves catching the sun. Mum had loved the seaside. It was her home turf and she'd sparkled, like the water in the photo. The insidious brown current of the deeply flowing Murray, where we swam on days of blistering heat, had never held the same appeal.

If I had a choice, I would bury my head in a nest of my arms and howl into the tablecloth. Today, though, is not about me. I clear my throat. It's time Dad and I talked. He usually avoids being trapped like this. I attempt the taboo topic of his future.

"Agatha seems like a lovely woman."

I watch my father twist a corner of his napkin. He has been unreasonably bad-tempered of late and I surmise that Agatha, his new neighbour, is the cause. It's a shame. I like her. She has a devilish sense of humour. As anticipated, his reply is one of complaint.

"Bloody curtains just fell apart. Now she's fixed them, she pops over willy-nilly."

"It's good to have company, Dad. You've been alone too long."

"I've already suffered having coffee with the woman, just to shut you up."

I detect in this last outburst, an automatic grouchiness, as if his heart is not in it. On my last visit, Agatha had stopped to chat while we watered his garden and my father's dour countenance had softened a little.

He continues with the usual spiel that he is too old and he is fine by himself. I react with uncharacteristic sharpness.

"What's age got to do with it, Dad?"

"How can I discard all my memories and start again?"

"Agatha has a past too. You can both keep and treasure your memories whilst making new ones. Seventy two is nowhere near old."

The argument is interrupted when a waiter barrels towards us. The swarthy, muscular man is misplaced in these dreary surroundings; incongruous against a backdrop of drab carpet and faded wallpaper. His forearm, draped with a scarlet cloth, thrusts forward with each bow-legged step, like a gunslinger, yet his smile is angelic and radiant. He waves a bottle with gusto under my father's nose.

"It is gratis. He, my boss says."

His black moustache twitches. I am mesmerised.

"You have the wrong table," says Dad.

"No. Boss remember you. You stay here many years."

"Sam! He's still the owner?" Dad looks around, eagerly.

"He had important meeting. Says he sorry for your loss."

"It was ten years ago."

"Here is photo. It lives on wall behind bar. He say take it and next time you come, you talk."

Red liquid gurgles into our glasses. The waiter bows, his square of red bobbing up and down. White teeth flash again as he departs.

We'd returned every year, buoyed by the owner's friendliness. Our holidays at the hotel had been wonderful. I'd swum with friends, while Dad fished and Mum read books under our striped umbrella. On a cold wintry day not long after the funeral I'd phoned Sam to cancel our summer booking. He deserved an explanation.

I sense that behind my father's blue eyes, now closed, memories are running riot, triggered by the kindness of a man he barely knew. I hold my tongue this time. My intuition is born from hope, rather than natural talent. Mum often said I wielded a shovel where a small trowel would have sufficed. I wait with fingers crossed.

Dad's eyes snap open and rove the room. I watch him straighten in his chair and take a deep breath. As his gaze comes full circle and rests quizzically on me, I reach forward and cover his hands with my own. He nods once in reply to my beseeching eyes and tilts his head sideways slightly in homage towards the waiter serving the far tables. He smiles. It is tremulous but has a hint of determination. He raises his glass, eyeing the red wine with satisfaction.

"Well, Suzie. I think I'll say yes."

"Yes?" I have no idea what 'yes' means.

"Agatha asked me to be her plus one at a cousin's wedding. I was going to say no but I think her offer of helping me choose a new suit is too good to pass up."

I snort. It is very unladylike but my father has just made a joke, albeit a weak one. I have missed all those Dad jokes, even the lame ones. Somehow he looks both sad and happy at the same time.

"It'll be your first date in over forty years. Way to go Dad." My smile outclasses the waiter's by a dining room mile.

Harley Therapy

Lyn McKINNON

“You have cancer?”

Nooo ...! I hear my voice ricocheting off the walls, although I'm sure my lips didn't move.

It can't be? The Specialist must have confused my records with my mother-in-law as she battled the cancer 'minefield'. It can't be me?

“Do you understand what I'm saying?” I'm back with the Specialist, watching his mouth pronounce his words slowly, with deliberation, “You have an aggressive cancer and we need to move quickly.”

And he did! From biopsy to surgery to eighteen months chemotherapy, lots of soul searching and loss. A bucket list that started with fear and trepidation.

“What do you want to do when you recover from this?” the nurse's words stunned me. Up to this point in my treatment, negativity had ruled my life. At fifty-eight I had considered my life was over and all I could concentrate on was the next chemotherapy regimen.

My reply was just as surprising. “Ride a Harley!” There was that voice again, without my lips moving!

“Oh, so you ride motor bikes?” The nurse's calm voice questioned me as she attached my chemotherapy line.

“Never!”

I had never ridden a motor bike in my life! Not a huge challenge to the average, but age was not on my side and I was physically challenged with no balance at all. But when my treatment finished, against my own better judgement, I drove straight to the Harley Dealer and purchased my Harley 1500cc Softail Standard Motor Cycle.

My husband had his motor bike licence and hadn't ridden for years but he was willing to help me learn to ride.

Cancer and age were soon forgotten as I started to learn to ride, first on a Yamaha 250cc, after I discovered I wouldn't be able to gain my licence on the Harley as its engine capacity and power to weight ratio were too high. Learning was with slow teething steps and many falls off the '250' with hard hits on the concrete in our backyard. But with much reaffirming of my challenge, I held my 'L' plates in my hand! I then planned to set off on the ride of my life, from Emerald where we lived in central Queensland up the coast to Mackay, and then up to Townsville and Cairns to Port Douglas at the top. The highlight of my planned trip was to surprise my son and his family in Townsville on the way.

My husband was planning a much smaller trip but decided to keep that to himself! He also had to break the news to me that, unfortunately, I was going to have to ride pillion passenger! Previously, on a practise ride to Rockhampton, I discovered riding pillion had its own challenges. Sitting on the back and allowing someone else to make the decisions needed a whole new set of skills! Also I hadn't expected I would have to learn how to flat pack a fortnight's luggage into a roll bag on the back of the Harley? I was used to packing my suitcase and throwing it in the back of the car!

Excitement was at knife's edge on the morning of our departure from Emerald. As we rolled along the highway the distinct throbbing of the Harley was music to my ears. The early morning sun was shining on my helmet as I concentrated on the ride and I started looking around me at the countryside as we travelled towards Mackay, past some amazing geologically aged rock formations near Moranbah.

After travelling about three hours we turned off the highway into a little town known as Nebo, re-fuelled the Harley and visited the very old Nebo Hotel to refresh the riders. I was amazed at the fact we could hop off the bike with an aching posterior, walk around for a few minutes and hop back on with a 'new backside'!

As soon as we rode over the mountains into Mackay I could see and smell the ocean! I soon realised being so close to nature on the Harley, with nothing surrounding me, was the most invigorating experience of my life!

After an over-night stay in Mackay, I was ready to head up the coast for more adventure, much to my husband's disbelief. He was sure I would want to go home. But oh no, the most amazing ride followed through tropical Queensland with the smell of the sugar cane harvest in full swing and the ocean beckoning at Proserpine and Bowen.

We snuck in to Townsville, and pulled up in my son's front yard. Some quizzical looks from my grandchildren playing in the yard until I took off my helmet.

"Dad! It's Nan on a Harley!" the eldest yelled as he raced back up the drive to find his father. It was so amazing to see them all and cuddle my new baby grandson! After a wonderful stay with them, we were off up the highway to Mission Beach where we had a very relaxing stay at a beach resort followed by a ride along the beach with the salt spray blowing on my face, cancer totally forgotten!

Cairns was almost our destination so I wasn't stopping there for long. Off up the highway following the ocean cliff face where skydivers were precariously diving over the edge. Then into Port Douglas. No way could I leave this beautiful place without a walk along the sand and a swim in the ocean.

After a few days relaxing, much to my husband's amazement, I asked if we could ride down the Atherton Tablelands on our way home. The highlight of the trip on a Harley! All those amazing sharp corners to lean in and out of. And then riding back down the mountains to the sight and smell of the ocean again!

After many challenges and incredible experiences, we rode back into Emerald safely and I was greeted with the wonderful news the cancer is in remission!

I can highly recommend 'Harley Treatment' to cure the soul!

All Quiet on the Western Front

Leone McMANUS

The battle was raging, night and day. The casualties were significant and care workers soldiered on tirelessly. No-one spoke, no-one complained when the masked attendants brought meals, tea and comfort.

Nothing stirred in the quiet of the home which was now off limits to all relatives. The pandemic raged across similar institutions blighting all who fell under its control. The residents were confined to their rooms and time was lost in soporific snoozes and snoring. Meals were dispensed by alien-like creatures in pseudo Hazmat suits.

One resident, however, was wide awake unlike the majority in the home. Born in 1922, she was hoping for a telegram from the Queen or the Prime Minister which she could show her children and grandchildren. She wondered how all those years had passed without her being aware of time passing so quickly. Last time her son visited she could only see him through a glass window in the sun room.

She picked up her sewing box, threaded a needle and chuckled. It was no good despairing and waiting for the inevitable. With the greatest of care she looked into the mirror and then back to her sewing. She carefully crafted a hand puppet with hair tied back in a bun. To embellish her puppet, she made a dress and handbag as well as stitching a pair of glasses.

"There you are Florence ... you look just like me", she laughed.

Over the next few days, she fashioned more hand puppets all of which resembled her family. Her son and his wife were too busy to visit but her granddaughter would come next week. She waited and waited as time slowed to an unbearable pace. Finally, the day came. Her granddaughter sat behind the glass window and waved to her grandmother.

Florence's eyes lit up like diamonds. She raised her hand with the puppet glove of herself and with her left one, raised the Queen puppet presenting her with a paper. Her granddaughter laughed and gave her the thumbs up.

The following week, her son and his wife visited. Once again she produced her self-puppet and one reminiscent of her son. She embraced the son puppet and hugged him until he realised her intent. She then extracted her son's wife's puppet and embraced her lovingly. Her son and his wife laughed at her antics.

"Poor Mum has lost it," he quipped.

The weekly visits were interspersed with Florence's puppet show where she communicated all the events of the last week. She produced a puppet which was bed-ridden and one with a small dog on the bed. One puppet was downcast and another had a cache of chocolates hidden in the pockets.

The following week when her granddaughter arrived, Florence had a new puppet. He was a distinguished and dapper man, like Errol Flynn or Clark Gable, with a moustache. Of all her puppets, the most effort was spent on this one.

She produced her self-puppet then the dapper man and the two of them embraced while they danced. Her granddaughter laughed and once again gave her the thumbs up. She repeated the performance when her son visited the next week.

"Poor Mum must miss Dad," her son remarked.

Over the following weeks, the same two puppets danced and embraced, danced and embraced. Her son and his wife seemed to take the minimal amount of time each visit. The man puppet now carried flowers and a sparkling bijou. The Florence puppet now had a smile which she had carefully sewn.

As the pandemic subsided and the home was able to relax restrictions, visitors were able to meet face to face, provided they wear a mask. Visitors returned and pets were once again allowed a brief visit.

Florence's family would visit on Sunday and she could hardly wait for them. She pushed her walker to the sunroom and waited for their arrival. She was brimming with anticipation.

Seated in the sunroom was another resident who sat quietly stroking his moustache. Florence greeted her relatives and then pointed to her now companion.

"I would like you to meet Charles but you may call him Charlie".

Charlie tried to stand but had second thoughts. He nodded to the visitors and slowly moved closer. He seated himself next to Florence.

Charlie turned to face Florence and gave her a loving kiss after which she giggled like a young girl. Florence explained to her family that Charlie had taken her dancing and given her sweets. She stated that they were madly 'in love'.

Her son stated that it could not be the case as she was riddled with arthritis and osteoporosis and Charlie was not much better. Both could barely walk but the puppets could.

From her lap, Florence produced herself and Charlie puppets. The two danced and danced and hugged as she moved them in a slow waltz.

The two looked lovingly into each other's eyes.

Love conquers all. The Pandemic may have its Dance Macabre but love wins the war.

Challenged

Vicki MENNIE

Heat swarms my body, palms show pinhead points of liquid. Bile and heartbeats mix in the base of my throat.

Right foot finds the first rung and so the climb begins. "Keep looking up. Concentrate on your hands and feet." The twenty-something girl behind with thick thighs and arms mouths her definite, clear and sincere words.

With each step I gain height. Weakness in my legs increases. Stomach churns; throat burns with acid build up. Saliva AWOL. "You're doing well, slow and steady. Keep focus, I'm right behind you."

I look up – platform closing in. *Yeh right. Some 60th birthday present, more like a good riddance to life.* "Nearly there." The reassuring blonde plaits sound from behind me. The quiver in my knees intensifies with every height-gaining step. "You've made it. Good job."

At the light, easy male tone I look up; see a youthful smile, a substantial single brow and black, wavy mass surrounding dark eyes. "Okay, I'll leave you with Joel now. You're in good hands."

The plaits disappear. "Hi, I'm Joel. Hold this bar when you step onto the platform."

My eyes peer across this flimsy looking excuse for stability – *it's so small, barely room for two, definitely no consideration for possible error. 'Oh dear God – seriously, why am I doing this? It's madness. Who am I trying to kid?' Sixty year olds don't do this. Do they?*

As my bare feet join Joel's, his white teeth glisten at me. "I can't do this, I'm sorry," my weak voice manages.

"Absolutely you can – most swingers say that on their first attempt. You'll love it, just don't look down."

Joel reaches out, takes my hand, turns me to face the timber bar that drops from oblivion way above my head. A full liquid coating disguises my palms. He passes a container of white powder; nods, "Chalk to ensure your grip, use as much as you need, then grab hold of this bar," his full lips ignorant of my trembling body, high temperature and gagging throat.

My hazel eyes slip to the net 15 feet below. "Look at me, Vicki."

Clammy – I buckle at the waist. Palms on knees, forehead facing my toes. Choking words escape, "I need to throw up."

"You'll be fine, slow deep breaths. In 1, 2, 3 ... out 1, 2, 3."

Returning to full height, "Do you have water?"

Joel passes a plastic cup half full of liquid – three gulps and it's empty. He edges me toward the teasing bar, suspended from nowhere.

Seriously – did I actually agree to this?

Joel points across the vacant, humid air, "Watch Simon."

Sitting side-saddle and waving from the opposing swing, a well-groomed blond with bulging biceps folds at the waist. His knees bend over the bar, and torso drops. With arms outstretched he reaches back – an upside down, broad, white smile dares me.

Joel inches me to the bar, which I am certain chuckles to itself, with every person that balances on this platform, 25 feet above solid earth.

Somewhere behind my eyes, a flash. The last image of my little brother appears. Full face, heavy genetic brow, groomed brown hair, uncertain eyes and half smile. I remember his delight and my determination at the constant challenges he presented in our early years.

"Bet you can't climb that tree. Bet you can't beat me at marbles. Bet you can't build a bigger Lego tower. Bet you can't lift that rock." And the delight in his dance of twirls, flapping wrists and arms – for every challenge I attempted and failed. The chase and rumble that ensued. Our squeals and giggles that percolated through the backyard.

Taken.

At 46, gone, just gone.

Cancer – his final challenge.

Twelve years have passed since his last day but the memories continue to spark without conscience or warning.

"Step to the edge of the platform, Vicki." Joel's words flip me back to the present.

I reacquaint with the surrounds. Refocus on my predicament.

I smirk at the thought that maybe this is yet another challenge set by Pete. *This one – I will prevail. Watching Pete?*

Every muscle throughout my body tenses. I steady the bar in my palms; wriggle my fingers to full stretch and grip, toes balancing on the edge of this platform built for two. "To recap instructions from this morning's training. Look straight ahead. First swing out steady your grip. Second swing out, fold your knees over the bar, stretch out, and look back at Simon. Third swing out, grip the bar with your

hands, release your legs and hang, feet to the floor. Fourth swing out keep hold of the bar until I tell you to drop, then drop exactly when I say, feet first into the net."

I fill my lungs, buckle my toes and air whooshes past my face. My grip falters with over moist palms – a gasp full of fear. Still, I manage readjustment and hold firm – relief. Second swing out – I raise my knees to fold over the bar. Hanging upside down, I stretch out and look back at Simon. Elation diverts the fear. Third swing out, I unfold and hang, legs vertical, waiting net beckoning. Amazement and exhilaration flood.

"Vicki, prepare. On the next swing forward, drop exactly when I tell you." Fear returns and swarms.

"Vicki ... drop," Joel's words, precise and loud, echo.

My reluctant fingers release. Feet first, I freefall, warm air slips the length of my body. The waiting net finally engulfs me. A tussle between air and safety, I bounce, bounce again and once more. A few small bounds then stillness. Lying face up, my eyes open – the net my cradle.

I've done it! Yes really done it!

"Woo hoo," escapes from my parched mouth.

My broad smile directs heavenward, right fist punches into the air and I know my beloved brother shares my elation.

We Can't Change the Wind, but we Can Adjust the Sails

Stephen MILLER

Richard reluctantly turned over and squinted sideways towards his vibrating phone. He knew who it was and why they were calling, so would give anything not to answer. But ignoring it wouldn't make the inevitable truth disappear. He exhaled heavily and picked up. His wife Jenny merely whispered, "Well ... he's gone."

This brutal confirmation quickly pushed Richard straight to the verge of shock. "Shall ... I come in?" he mumbled. What was he thinking? Of course, he should go in; she needed him now, and frankly, he needed her. Richard dressed quickly, picked up his car keys and bent down to stroke the dog. Her sleepy brown eyes seemed to reflect a genuine, empathetic understanding of the moment's gravity; this momentarily consoled Richard.

Four and a half months earlier, their twenty-year-old son, James, had been full of life, happy, popular and extraordinarily busy at University. He did, however, have a pain in his jaw which had become increasingly more painful when eating. After much nagging from his mother, James had gone to the dentist who referred him to a specialist. He thought James' jaw might be out of alignment, but crucially, he sent him for an MRI, 'just to check there was nothing else going on'.

Sadly, there was indeed something else going on, and a tumour was discovered. Following a biopsy that confirmed its malignancy, James began chemotherapy and radiation treatment immediately. He had been so positive upon hearing he had cancer and was very gung-ho about winning the fight ahead. But as the months went by, his valiant efforts were proving more and more challenging to uphold. None of the treatments worked, and soon James' cancer had metastasised to his lungs. Small

dots at first, but then growing at an alarming rate unchallenged by medical intervention. Ultimately, there would be no room in his lungs for breath, and James died an undignified death, sedated heavily to avoid the inevitable panic of suffocation.

As Richard drove to the hospital for that last time, all he could hear in his head was James, crying out to his mother a few weeks before, "Help me Mummy ... help me!" Jenny had held his pale, grey hand and stroked his forehead, but there was little else she could do. The days of childhood bandaids or 'kisses better' wouldn't work anymore. She painfully held back her tears, for they would not be helpful. Witnessing their once healthy twenty-year-old, regress to the cries of a toddler was simply heartbreaking.

Richard smacked the steering wheel hard and yelled, "WHY? WHY? WHY?".

He squeezed his eyes tightly shut to clear away the tears refracting red in the traffic light. The sun would not be up for an hour, and it felt odd to see so little traffic on the typically bustling roads. The stark realisation that his child was gone though, continued to slowly trickle down Richard's cheeks.

The other recent life issue Richard had been grappling with, had evaporated into pathetic insignificance. For many years Richard had been gaslighted by his boss. This was a man who was not only good at it, but who seriously loved to wield this sick, evil power. Richard wasn't his only victim, and despite loving his job and doing it well, he had started to believe his battered self-esteem. He turned up for work every day despite juggling the needs of a very sick son. When a toxic co-worker showed little compassion for his situation and began berating him over a trivial matter, he could take

it no more and carefully manoeuvred the ranting colleague out of his office, closing the door firmly behind her. She saw this as 'physical abuse' and reported it. Following a kangaroo court interrogation with the company lawyer, Richard found himself unjustly dismissed for allegedly touching another employee inappropriately – complete nonsense, but there was to be no reprieve. The gas lighting boss would have no doubt celebrated the end to another highly successful campaign.

Aged 60, unemployed and now grieving badly for his son, Richard reflected on his almost untenable situation. Every waking moment he just wanted to run away and began to understand why, following a significant family tragedy, so many relationships often fall apart. But Richard had two other children who needed him. Jenny, too, an incredibly stoic woman, would also be depending on his support. But the mountain in front of him appeared ridiculously high, and Richard would be lying if he ever said he hadn't considered taking the easy way out.

Five years on, Richard still grieves for his son daily, but over time, he's learned to 'laugh through his tears' as he puts it. He even manages to feel grateful, for at least he has no one to blame for James' death – some parents are not so lucky. Richard 'passively retired' from the 'day job' of forty years and decided to only immerse himself in things that bring him happiness and joy. That would be his 'running away', his 'therapy' against the daily grind of grief. He retrained as a marriage celebrant and has since performed more marriage ceremonies than he can remember. He unashamedly basks in all the love, optimism and happiness on display at weddings.

Richard also perplexed Jenny when he applied for and got the position of local school crossing supervisor. But he reasoned this too would be a perfect blend of responsibility, community involvement and happiness. The relationships developed with all his little (and big) people lifts Richard's spirits every day. He also took up Magic, initially as a COVID lockdown hobby, but now enjoys it so much, he performs at weddings.

If the last five years taught Richard anything, it's that when a devastating tornado rips through your life, age is no barrier for recalibrating your emotional compass to seek out brighter horizons.

Our time on earth is just too short not to wake up each morning, full of sunshine, ready to embrace the new day ahead.

It Will Be Fun

Jean MILLS

My husband always bought the newspaper to read on the train to work in Sydney during the week. He continued to buy it after he retired. Now he walks to the paper shop each morning and reads it at home after breakfast. I never joined him as it was too early for me to get out of bed. When daylight saving necessitated putting the clock back, I was, of course, awake an hour earlier. I decided I would join him for this walk. We set off each morning hand in hand. Where we lived, we could vary our three kilometre return jaunt utilising different streets or walking both sides of the railway line. When I got a fraction fitter we even extended our travels to include other streets along the perimeter. It was an enjoyable amble chatting and sticky-beaking at all the houses, gardens and birds. We met other people and their dogs out and about also. We strolled along and wished we had a walking dog to sniff along with us too.

Robert had competed in the City to Surf runs for ten years in a row between the ages of 31 to 40 years of age. His brother, who was ten years younger, ran with him. Robert continued to jog around the Sydney Botanical Gardens during his lunch hour until his knees prevented him from doing so. I played a lot of tennis and golf until retirement. We were both reasonably fit and healthy with no serious medical ailments. These morning walks were the glue in our otherwise busy social life. We also went on bush and beach saunters on Sundays with our family and friends.

Then Picton Parkrun came to Wollondilly Shire. To be precise, the aim was to run or walk a total of five kilometres each Saturday morning to get fit and make friends with other people of all ages with the impetus on individual speeds. The 'Run' was two and a half kilometres out to the end of the Picton Botanical Gardens and beyond and back along the same cement path alongside Stonequarry Creek. We applied for our Bar Code Run Badges so we could be timed at the end of each race. "It will be fun!" we said.

The first morning, we turned up a little early. There were fifty plus other fun-runners hanging around for the run to start. Many were wearing the latest in colour-coordinated Lycra sporting apparel, proper jogging shoes and doing 'warm up exercises'. "They are very serious about this," we remarked. We did stamp our feet to warm up our cold toes as we lined up at the starting line. The horn went off and off we set with all the others into the chilly fog. By the 100 metre mark most of the gallopers had passed us including a young fellow pushing a pram!

Further on, we saw a small wooden bridge over a gully. We had to step aside whilst another ten people sprinted past us. We trudged doggedly on as fast as Robert's knees and my old hips would let us and although we were not out in the front, there were quite a few slow hikers behind us. Some of them had brought along children and dogs.

By the time we reached the two kilometre mark, the leaders were returning so we acknowledged them with jolly salutations. They thundered back past us wearing impressive sports singlets and shorts, expensive runners and wet sweat bands lining their brows.

Robert and I were wearing warm tracky daks and long-sleeved t's with hoodies because, after all, it was winter. In hindsight, we should have worn traffic hazard gear to warn all the others to pass us safely.

We made it to the turn-around mark manned by Parkrun personnel to bring home the rear of the pack! Maybe there were about thirty or less people still strutting behind us. Despite our advanced age, we were determined to not let them pass. However, in the course of the next couple of kilometres we were overtaken by at least half of those left. They darted past despite us increasing our gait. At the aforementioned bridge, we were, alas, outstripped by the rest.

We kept going. We were determined to finish. We came last in the field and clocked in at 60 minutes. It had taken us an hour to walk five kilometres. We had plodded on holding hands, as is our usual walking style, to the end.

A Parkrun photographer (waiting patiently) took a photo of us 70+ year olds as we crossed the finish line. They said we were adorable!

We continued to participate each Saturday morning. I was determined to break the 50 minutes for 5 kilometres. Robert could have strode it faster but we were in this together. Each week I strove to gain my objective devising new strategies to increase my speed. I was reasonably confident I had broken my set time barrier after seven attempts and I did. I had to force my hips to move faster and trot part of the way whilst Robert continued with his loping style!

I had developed a stitch in my left side but continued to limp home despite the pain. I am not a quitter! The CT Scan revealed I had given myself a groin hernia! I am sure my tough attitude enabled me to mentally and physically continue and cope with my self-inflicted trauma. I have now learnt it is not wise to push my body to its limits.

I had my repair operation and recovered quickly. I have given up Picton Park runs to protect myself from potential negative effects and move on from this injury without long term consequences. Despite this set back, I am hardy, tough and unstoppable. Age has nothing to do with it! I am again walking to the paper shop each morning with my dear husband hand in hand.

Miracle Girl

Trish MOLLER

Marg and I are the classic tortoise and hare.

Although we both have a northern European heritage, her parents were Australian born and clued up. My parents left war-torn Rotterdam with nowhere to live and a baby, taking ten exhausting days to fly from the Netherlands to Australia.

Marg and I grew up on the opposite sides of Sydney – she was a Shire Girl and I grew up on the edge of the bush in north-west Sydney.

Back then, not many girls completed their HSC but I stayed on because I didn't know what else to do. She always wanted to be a cartographer.

Her parents had urged her to get a job in the public service as it would mean job security. I fell into it while waiting for my scholarships to arrive but, though I felt like a new settler in a foreign land, I found I loved being a cartographer.

Women cartographers were a novel initiative in an established world where men ruled and promotions were conferred based on seniority.

Marg and I first saw each other at Tech where we were undertaking a Land and Engineering Certificate. We would smile at each other like co-conspirators in a secret society.

She was beautiful: Scandinavian, tanned with enviably long blonde, thick straight hair. The quintessential Aussie beach babe. She married her high school sweetheart and they had bought a house already.

When she transferred to my office, we got to know each other. Work was serious but the workplace was irreverent about everything else. Nothing was sacred. Our bosses were a mix of mostly benign chauvinists, hedonists, toadies and opportunists ranging from self-righteous lay preacher misogynists to functioning alcoholics. On every social occasion, alcohol ruled. I would rail about injustices, she adopted quiet acceptance.

At lunchtimes, as we walked up town, I would match my pace to hers, trying not to think about how many more shops we could see if we only walked a bit faster.

That winter, I noticed that her fingers were almost purple and asked if her hands were cold. We sat down to eat our lunch and in her usual calm manner, she told me her story. It shocked me to the core.

At just fifteen years of age, her spleen had been removed. She spoke about it in her usual calm way, with stoic equanimity and without any self-pity while I struggled to hide my dismay, disbelief and horror. How could someone so young! So clever! So beautiful! Be so sick? It was beyond my limited experience and comprehension.

Her specialists had explained why she would never be able to have children and that her life expectancy would be affected.

Back at work, I locked myself in the toilet and bawled my eyes out.

Sometime later, she took extended sick leave and when she returned to work, it was painfully obvious that her beautiful hair was falling out. Despite her valiant efforts to maintain normality, in time, her drug regime enforced the dreadful and inevitable outcome and her hair was cut short.

In time however, her hair grew back in all in its' previous glory – perhaps even thicker and lusher than before. I thought she had triumphed as life slipped slowly back to normal.

We didn't talk about it for a while until I learned that she now had a dedicated team of specialists who worked on managing her condition.

Then, one day she told me that she was expecting a baby. I was so emotional. This was miraculous, unexpected, wonderful, scary unknown territory.

No-one knew how her pregnancy would progress but she defied all expectations and bloomed throughout and not without consequence, gave birth to the loveliest, healthy baby girl. It was an extraordinary achievement.

After early hospitalisation due to much more serious antenatal health complications the second time, she gave birth to a tiny, ten week premature but healthy daughter.

Life went on but in time, inevitably, the immunosuppressants she had been taking for so long resulted in her contracting devastating mouth cancer. The cruelty of it! A long recovery resulting in difficulty eating, as one full side of her top teeth had been removed and she was left with a large hole in the roof of her mouth. Eating was a painful ordeal, but she persisted. Nutritional supplements that would have helped conflicted with her medications so food was important. At her daughters' wedding we were still eating long after everyone else had finished.

She continued working and retired at the age of 67 after which her grandchildren became the centre of her life.

Then suddenly, after contracting a strep infection, things spiralled quickly out of control resulting in sepsis – the consequences of which were nothing short of shocking: intensive care and specialty wards for weeks on end, teams of specialists working day and night, numerous blood transfusions, antibiotics, oxygen, sedation, dialysis, intensive pain medication. Complex circulation problems made the loss of limbs and/or digits, even her nose and lip a possibility. Finally, her last line of defence – her mental health was affected. Her bastion. Her secret weapon. Was she going to give up after a lifetime of martyrdom to this hideous disease that never lets go? Was that last citadel of forbearance, grit and determination going to crumble under these seemingly insurmountable odds?

Could she hold up when so many would have submitted long ago? Would that legendary spirit and the boundless love for and from her girls and fiancé be enough? And her adoration for her beloved grandchildren?

And what about her wonderful, dedicated medical team on whom she is so reliant? They want their miracle girl to be their miracle too.

Just knowing we're all gunning for her is making a huge difference to her protracted recovery. This hideous and cruel disease cannot win. This is just another hurdle to be hurdled.

Never give up! Bugger the odds! Bring her mascara and hair brush!

Age? It's just part of the journey.

Resurgence

Martha MOLLISON

Bernice clung to the cockatoo-munched railing of her narrow front deck as if she were surfing a moderate sea swell. Her stomach lurched a little as she nervously scanned the street to the west, aching to spot that dark blue Ute rounding the corner and heading for her home.

Living through each lonely week had become as dull and unvaried as reading the phone book. Not that she lacked things to do. There was her sewing, so many books and puzzles from friends, as well as the listen apps and Facebook, but nothing engaged her much anymore. Except for Thursday, which pulsed like a lighthouse whenever she thought of her gardener's visit.

Since he'd started coming she had made sure her weekly delivery of groceries included a nice cake for afternoon tea. Her granddaughter Michaela, who handled the online ordering for her, must think she'd developed a serious sweet tooth.

Ah! There he is!

Bernice smoothed her hair and tried to look calm. Welcoming, but not over-excited. She remembered trying to achieve this appearance in Year 9 when she had her first heady crush on a boy at school. Somehow she'd usually contrived to be passing his classroom door just as that old beast of an English teacher dismissed them, always (thankfully) later than the other classes. And on some rare occasions she'd catch his eye and get a smile. That's all, but that was thrilling.

And here she was again, seventy years further on in life, catching her breath in just as quickly when another door was about to open.

Steve waved out his window as he cruised to a stop. He reached onto the floor beside him and lifted two pots with bright blooming geraniums, just as she'd requested last week.

They reminded her of that summer she'd spent in Switzerland as a young backpacker, trekking up sloping village streets where every window box was decked out with scarlet geraniums and trailing greens. Only later had she wondered why *everyone* had red geraniums and nothing different, not even white ones.

But these days any touchstone of her early adventures soothed her, reassured her that the years hadn't been wasted and still weren't entirely lost.

Steve lifted a spade from the tray, motioned up the side of the house, and skirted past the frangipani on the corner. Bernice turned to grasp her self-standing walking stick and made her way carefully through her dim and overly-familiar house to the back door.

"Where would you like 'em?" he asked, holding them up.

"Where I can see them easily from the kitchen window." She eased down the concrete step and sat on her green wooden garden bench. "How about this side of the bird bath?" she suggested, pointing a crooked finger toward the round centre garden.

He placed the pots so they formed the two nearer corners of a triangle anchored by the arty glass and wrought iron bird bath.

"Looks just right," she confirmed. "There's a trowel and some quick-release fertilizer in the laundry."

As he knelt to plant the flowers precisely where she wanted them, she admired his nimble tanned legs and arms. It had been so long—how long? Thirty years since the sight of a man in her garden made her blood race.

Disturbing as these rushes of feeling were, Bernice savoured them as reassurance that her emotional sap was still running. Visual memories of past places, the Whitsunday Islands, the Warrumbungles, even the lofty Alps were one thing, but this tingling, rushing tide was altogether more.

She was under no illusions. The crush she'd developed on this polite and handsome young man would no more be requited than her infatuation when she was fourteen, but that was okay with her.

He was back now with his lawnmower and her gaze followed his circuitous route as he carefully manoeuvred around her randomly placed raised beds and wandering flagstone paths. Once he finished trimming with the whipper snipper, he approached her asking, "What next?"

"How are the blueberries along the back fence?"

"Quite a few ripe ones."

"Good. Could you get a bowl from the kitchen and pick some for us?"

She relished the sound of the word 'us'.

He reappeared with a cereal bowl and headed up the back. "And a passionfruit, too, please," she called out.

She urged herself to stand upright and re-entered the kitchen. The plates, spoons, mugs and prepped teapot were already on a tray on the counter by the back door. She started the electric jug, plated the lemon cake from its box and got some whipped cream from the fridge.

She concentrated hard to lift the laden tray but realised she couldn't manage the tray as well as the door and the step without her walking stick. For a moment she almost wept at her inability. But Steve reappeared just then. "Oh, let me take that," he exclaimed. So she gratefully followed him out to the garden setting.

"I forgot the knife," she mumbled, shaking her head in embarrassment.

"No worries." He was off and back again.

She served up the cake and carefully mounded the top with cream, blueberries and passionfruit.

He reached across the little table and took the colourful portion she held out, his hand making momentary contact with hers.

"How good is this?" he said, relaxing back in his chair and taking a first bite. Turning to her, he caught her eyes and gave her a great smile.

"Yes, indeed, how good is this?" she thought.

Age is Just a Number

Marissa MORENO

It was December 9, 1941, my father was 17 years old and a 4th year student in the local High School. Like any normal day, he went to school but noticed his teachers looking distressed. When class began, his teacher announced that classes will be suspended for the rest of the year.

They were happy to avoid three more months of schooling before graduation, but they were in for a grim revelation. The teacher announced that the country, a commonwealth of USA, had declared war on Japan as a retribution for the deliberate sneak attack by the Naval and Air Force of Imperial Japan on the Naval Base at Pearl Harbor and the Subic Naval and Clark Air Bases in the Philippines.

The news travelled across the neighbourhood and the city was in chaos. At home his family held a meeting about what steps to take and places to go because living in the city was not safe. After that, Dad dashed to meet his high school sweetheart Charing (my future mother) and told her about the family plans. She understood and sadly they had to go their separate ways. Her family evacuated to the outskirts of town down south. While my father's family went the opposite direction to the mountains up north.

His older brother, a reserved officer joined the Philippine Army. He was assigned and fought the Japanese soldiers in Mindanao. His older sister, a school teacher, met and married a Filipino soldier and moved out on their own. That left him with his parents and his younger sister who assisted Mama with the house chores. Dad was the only one strong enough to do tasks that required strength.

Food and water were scarce in their evacuation site because the source of water was in a valley. To get water, he used a hollow bamboo tube for container and carried it over his shoulders up to the site. As they adjusted to the harsh life in the mountains, they learned the Philippine Army had purposely set fire to the large warehouse full of canned goods to stop the Japanese from seizing the goods. The burning of the bodega was not a successful effort because the fire only gutted the wooden structure of the building while the canned goods could still be salvaged. Dad was 18 years old and without wasting time he traversed the rugged terrain and steep slope of the mountain to the site of the smouldering warehouse.

When he got there, people were retrieving whatever goods they could recover. He managed to acquire a sack full and had to move fast before the Japanese soldiers came. Dad was able to make two trips back and forth to the evacuation site of 8 kms away. Through their effort and determination, the family managed to sustain themselves over the months.

In due course, the Japanese took over the government and city life appeared to return to normal, so they decided to return to their house within the Philippine Railway compound.

On their return to the city, Papa and Mama went ahead while Dad stayed behind to retrieve essential items that could still be useful, so he travelled last. He rode the train bringing a sack full of burnt canned goods. After travelling a short distance, the train came to a full stop. Curiously, he looked out the window and saw a platoon of Japanese soldiers blocking the train. They were checking the

passengers, turning over personal cargoes searching for weapons. With his head bent low, two Japanese soldiers confronted Dad pointing their bayoneted rifle close to his body. While one soldier barked incoherent Japanese, the other soldier slashed open the sack with his Samurai sword exposing the burnt canned goods. They were both furious and nudged him with their rifles. He was so terrified and cringed in fear not knowing what to do. Then suddenly the train conductor recognized him, interceded to explain to the soldiers that Dad was a civilian and a son of a railway employee. He wondered how the conductor made the soldiers understand him because the soldiers nodded, turned around and left. After matters got cleared, Dad thanked the conductor for his courage of coming to his rescue. He was shaking while he walked all the way home. Only then did he cry when he faced his Mama and Papa.

Despite the war, life in Cebu appeared normal. Papa was back to his railway work while my mom's family returned to their house. It was then that Dad visited Mom more often.

Mom's father died in January 1944 of a heart attack. He was only 50 years old. About that time, Dad got close to her family and decided to stay with them but in a separate room from Mom. As time rolled on, her mother suggested that my mom and dad should get married. The date was set for October 31, 1944. Only a few of our family members witnessed the simple ceremony followed by a modest wedding party at home.

Days, weeks, months passed. Everything went well when suddenly sounds of airplane drones were heard. They were American dive bombers attacking the business area owned by the Japanese. At the same time the American planes levelled the University which the Japanese utilized as their Headquarters. Hundreds of Japanese soldiers died. All along Dad did not know the whereabouts of my mom although she told him later that she and her companions ran far away from the city that was being bombarded by the Americans.

On the days that followed, the American B-52 bombers flew over the city and dropped bombs destroying almost all buildings and establishments.

Thus, began their uncertain journey to freedom. Then the greatest news spread all throughout the neighbourhood that the Japanese Imperial Forces had surrendered to the Americans.

It was time to start a whole new life. Dad and Mom were only 20 and 19 proving that you're never too young or too old to make a difference.

Above the Clouds

Geoff NADIN

It's not often one comes face to face with a hero, but on ANZAC Day, 2008, I had that privilege, when I joined a reunion of former members of an Australian Airforce squadron.

I was there, not on my own behalf, never having had the opportunity to serve, but to represent a friend. Dear old Lindsay had never missed a reunion before, cherishing memories and the camaraderie of a group that shrank, year by year. Now, age and failing health had caught up with him, too. I had listened, rapt, to his stories of squadron life in wartime New Guinea; the hardships, friendships, laughter, and losses of those long ago times, times before I was born.

My hobby is building scale model aircraft and I'd been privileged to present Lindsay with a model of the very aircraft on which he had served as armourer, back in 1942. Tears welled in his eyes as he accepted my gift: "Listen, mate, I can't make it this year but I'm sure the blokes from the squadron won't mind if you sub for me, just this once." I needed no further persuasion. Hanging between us was the unspoken acknowledgement that Lindsay would never again join his old mates.

Upon my arrival in town, not presuming to march with the squadron, I made straight for the pub where they met. The bar was full of grizzled men, some noisily joshing each other as only old mates can do, others quietly watching or staring into the distance, their thoughts a million miles and half a century away. A hand waved to me from a corner table where a group of six or seven sat. I recognised Stan from Lindsay's description. The red hair, sparse but far from grey, was an instant giveaway.

"C'mon over here, mate. What'll you have?" I took the last seat, exchanging greetings, shaking hands, meeting the eyes of men a generation my senior. Any discomfort I might have feared was soon dispelled. The old team welcomed me 'in loco' of Lindsay. I played my part, thanks to Lindsay's vivid reminiscences, still fresh in my mind.

Several shouts later, anecdotes and ancient memories still flowed. Everyone had their turn, it seemed, almost a ritual with which they had become familiar. But one man remained silent. Slumped low in his seat in the corner, his beer barely touched, his hands atop a wooden cane, he made no contribution to the animated chatter around him. On his deeply lined face was a look of concentration, of suppressed pain. Though it was warm inside the bar, even stuffy, he was pale, and his hands shook. From time to time, he grimaced, sighed, shifted in his seat, as if to find a less uncomfortable position. Stan must have noticed me observing the old man. He turned to me, "Sorry, should have introduced you, this is Clifford. He's not one of our lot but with his past he's very welcome."

I offered my hand to the old gentleman. He released his grip on the cane and as he leaned toward me he winced, gasped, shook his head and fell back. "Are you alright?" I asked, redundantly. "No, it's just age," he replied, "Body's not up to it anymore. The old spine's gone on me." I offered a platitudinous commiseration.

"Cliff's RAF," said Stan, "Spitfire pilot, Battle of Britain and all that."

My curiosity and respect grew. I was face to face with one of "The Few", my boyhood heroes, characters from a mythical past. "Really?" I blurted, "I'm honoured to meet you. I bet you've some tales to tell."

"Oh, you know," he shrugged his bony shoulders. I recognised the clipped English tone of his accent for the first time; that, and the dismissive attitude of one who probably had tales that few could aspire to tell.

"He was shot down, twice," Stan volunteered. I looked at Clifford for confirmation. He nodded:

"That's right, once over the Home Counties and then into the Channel. Got out, as you can see."

"I can see, alright. What an experience! You lived to fight another day."

"That I did. Flew until forty-seven. Then they discharged me, more's the pity."

"Nineteen forty-seven?" I said, "Then, you would have flown the last of the Spitfires, before jets came in."

His face brightened, his rheumy eyes shone, he straightened his crooked back, "Oh, yes! The Mark Twenty-two. What an aircraft! Took off like a rocket, and still going strong at twenty thousand feet." As he spoke, he held his cane like the joystick of a fighter plane, pulling it back towards him. His voice was strong, his eyes were focussed on something far ahead, way beyond the walls of this noisy pub. In that moment, I was with him in the cockpit. I saw as if through a prism the chiselled good looks, the pencil moustache, the thick, dark Brylcreemed hair swept back from an unlined forehead. I let him finish, savouring the moment, somewhere far above the clouds.

"Inside, you're still twenty years old, aren't you?" I said.

He fixed me with those watery eyes: "Thanks for reminding me. What's age got to do with it?"

Troublesome Ted

Lyndall NAIRN

Monday, 20th May 1918. The teacher's residence, Gerringong Public School, NSW South Coast, "Wake up, Alex!" Edith flung open the bedroom curtains, hoping that the dim pre-dawn light would help rouse her husband. He mumbled but didn't stir, so she walked to the bed and shook his shoulder.

"Ted has gone, and the bicycle is missing from the shed."

"What?" murmured Alexander.

"It looks like Ted has taken the bicycle and ridden to the station. He has gone to enlist just like he said he would."

That was enough to bring last night's argument back into Alexander's consciousness. He had really hoped that his listing of all the reasons why Ted should not join the army would have convinced his 17-year-old son, but if Ted had actually left, then last night's argument had been in vain. Suddenly, Alexander was fully awake.

"We have to stop him," he said, "but I can't go because I have to teach today. Can you go after him?"

Edith's heart sank at the prospect, but she agreed that was the only option.

"Take Ethel with you. She won't put up with his nonsense."

Edith walked across the hall to wake her daughter and to explain the challenge that lay ahead of them. After a hurried breakfast, Alexander harnessed the horse and sulky and drove Edith and Ethel to Gerringong station.

"He has probably gone to the Recruiting Depot in Sydney, not Wollongong, because he might run into people who know him there, and they could identify him as under-age, so you should buy tickets to Central Station," Alexander said.

"I don't understand why Ted is so pig-headed about this! Why does he think it's a great idea to get himself killed?" Ethel exclaimed. "He knows Cyril was badly wounded last year; he's just ignoring the danger."

"Ethel, don't you get worked up," Alexander said. "You have to talk calmly to him. That's the only way to get him to see reason."

Edith and Ethel were anxious during the three-hour train trip to Sydney, partly because they didn't know what time Ted had left Gerringong. If he had caught a train late last night, he would be in Sydney by now and may have already enlisted. Even if he had caught the earliest morning train, they might not be able to find him in time to stop him.

From Central Station, they walked up the hill to Hyde Park and found the Central Recruiting Depot, where young men were lining up in front of the recruiting officials. Edith and Ethel peered inside the marquee, looking for Ted, but they were stopped by a stern, armed soldier: "Only recruits inside." They backed away.

"Let's try the next tent," Ethel suggested, pointing to one nearby marked "Medical Examinations". Sure enough, the men were leaving the recruitment marquee by the side flap, and forms in hand, were walking across to the next tent.

"There he is!" Ethel exclaimed, as Ted emerged. She ran up behind him and snatched the enlistment form out of his hand.

"Give that back!" Ted yelled at his sister. She spun around and doubled over the form, preventing him from retrieving it.

Ethel's jaw dropped as she read what he had written. "Mum, look at this! What lies! Ted is claiming to be Douglas. He thinks he can pass himself off as his brother who is five years older than him."

"Oh, really Ted!" Edith sighed, "I am so disappointed in you!"

"Besides," added Ethel, "Douglas is already in the service. He can't enlist twice!"

"Shush," hissed Ted. "Douglas is in the Navy. These Army blokes don't know anything about him. Ethel, you don't understand what I'm doing, so just leave me alone."

"Now Ted, let's calm down," Edith said. "You are not old enough to enlist. I know you don't want to hear this, but the medical officer only needs a quick look at you to see that you are not twenty-two, so let's give up on this venture and go home."

"No!" Ted insisted. "I've been patient long enough, and I'm not going to wait any longer."

A brusque-looking sergeant approached them. "Any problems here?" he asked.

"We don't want my brother to enlist because he's too young," Ethel said.

The sergeant glanced at Ted, then looking directly at Edith, said, "If your son is between the ages of 18 and 21, he can enlist with his parents' written permission."

Edith faced her defiant son and realised that she had to make a choice. Should she tell the truth about Ted's age, stop him joining the army and risk having him turn against the rest of his family, or, should she tell a lie about his age, and let him fulfil his dream, but risk his being wounded or something worse?

The sergeant took advantage of Edith's hesitation and indicating the form in Ethel's hand, asked, "Can I see that?" She handed it over. Then gesturing towards the Medical Examinations tent, the sergeant said to Ted, "Come with me."

As he moved aside the tent flap, the sergeant said, "It's true that the Army needs all the recruits we can get, so we do enlist young fellows like you if we have your parents' permission. On your form, you have given your age as twenty-two, but your sister says you're too young, so something's amiss."

"No, sir, I have my birth certificate here," said Ted as he produced Douglas's birth certificate.

"Look, son, some young hopefuls provide their older brothers' birth certificates, and occasionally we turn a blind eye, but in this case, your mother and sister are objecting on the spot. We'll let you do the medical exam today, but when you turn up for training, you have to give your correct name on a 'stat. dec.' form and your parents' written permission. Can you do that?"

Looking at his feet to hide his blush, Ted said, "Yes, sir. I understand that age has everything to do with it."

My Time Today

Elizabeth NEWMAN

“Great rehearsal everyone. See you next week.” Eileen’s farewell sang out joyfully to the rest of the choir as she strutted to the door in her shimmering peacock-coloured caftan. Just before she exited, she gave a cheeky wiggle of her bottom, raised her arms in triumph and broke into song, “Happy Birthday to me, Happy Birthday to me. I’m seventy-seven today!” She beamed as we chorused our surprise and congratulations, then dashed out the door leaving us marveling at her agility and enthusiasm for life. It was at this moment that I decided a shopping spree was imminent, given that I was also going to soon celebrate a *significant* birthday.

The following day, straight after work, I raced down to the Musicians Mart. It was pelting rain, but I was not to be deterred as I strode down King Street in my work suit to gaze once again on the creamy, streamlined short scale electric bass hanging in the window. I’d been eyeing it off for some weeks but wasn’t sure that taking up a new instrument at my age was a good idea. I’d borrowed a bass and had been attempting to play, but it was big, cumbersome and my fingers just wouldn’t do what I needed them to. Now, as I scrutinised this instrument, I realised I needed to feel its weight and how it fit against my diminutive frame. Irene’s enthusiasm from last night was still with me but as I entered the shop, I felt very out of place. The age gap was obvious. A skinny young man with stringy brown hair and ripped black jeans was sitting in the corner playing an electric guitar, his fingers running effortlessly up and down the neck. A couple of forty something blokes were behind the counter and one was serving the thirty something surfer dude who was buying acoustic guitar strings. I felt out of my depth and unsure of how to even begin a conversation with the other salesman, all beanie and beard, who was tapping rhythmically on the counter – obviously a musician. *Who was I kidding?*

As if I would be able to learn electric bass to any level of proficiency. I had trouble getting my fingers to thread a needle! Was this some sort of life crisis playing out? Maybe I could pretend to be buying the instrument for my ‘granddaughter’ as a surprise birthday gift.

Before my indecision could get the better of me, he looked up from his tapping and gave me a welcoming smile.

“How can I help you?”

“Uh, I’m interested in that cream electric short scale,” I nodded in the direction of the bass hanging up high on the wall.

“Sure, the VTG series, nice one,” he crooned as he deftly hooked it down and laid it across the counter for me, “Classic cream; looks great with the maple neck. Last one in stock.”

“I’d like to try it out please.” I said with a false bravado. “Need to get the feel of it. Feel how heavy it is, was what I was really thinking. I’m a small woman and even the short scale seemed big to me.”

“Sure, use the back room.” He gestured to the back of the shop and I hoped to heaven that there wouldn’t be anyone else in there. I felt self-conscious enough as it was.

I carefully lifted the beautifully curvaceous bass and carried it out back, noticing that the weight was manageable. I pulled aside the heavy black curtain, relieved that there was some privacy, and nervously looked at the huge amp with the many knobs and controls. Again, the doubts surfaced and niggled at my confidence. I was going to sound so terrible compared to young ‘stringy hair’ out the front with his effortless riffing.

Before my doubts could overtake me, the salesman had followed me in. "You'll need this lead, and I'll set the volume for you. Have a go." His encouraging tone and warm smile helped to lessen my doubts.

I perched on the stool, legs crossed, with the bass cradled against my body. It felt snug. I tentatively played a G scale, feeling so inadequate as the riffs from the young guitarist out front pierced the back room. Then again, at least it drowned me out.

"You can play louder, don't worry about that guy out front. I'll turn you up. These little short scale basses can pack a punch. Go for it," he said cheekily.

His enthusiasm was infectious, so I launched into the opening riff from 'Smoke on the Water' and gave it all I had.

"Ah, he said. A classic riff never ages. So, what do you think?"

"I like it. It's a good fit and sounds great." I looked up at him, no longer too self-conscious to meet his gaze. "You having lessons? You need to watch those left fingers. They're too curled."

Ah, years of violin when I was a kid, although that was a long time ago. I smiled at the memory of my virtuoso aunty struggling to teach me violin. "But I don't play anymore."

"Yeah really different hand position for bass. The secret is to relax those fingers. You'll get the hang of it." His unwavering optimism that, with enough practise, I could play this instrument buoyed my commitment. This guy was not judging me at all. He didn't think I was too old: that was all in my head.

"I'll take it and I'll need a funky guitar strap too." I said as we headed to the front counter.

"Ah the SX VTG! Had my eye on that." The young guitarist was now at the counter voicing his envy.

"My time today." I chirped gleefully. "You'll have to wait till the next shipment." I turned back to the counter. "Do you give a senior's discount?" I asked mischievously as I reached for my wallet.

A Stroke of Luck

Don NICHOLSON

George hadn't long been in the 'old people's home' before he ran away. That doesn't quite describe what he did. There were no rules at the establishment to stop him from going out. All he had to do was complete a form with details of his absence, but as he didn't know where he was going or what time he'd be back, he just ignored the form.

The other problem with 'ran away' was that his recent minor stroke – which had resulted in him being in the place – meant the gait of his escape could hardly be described as 'ran'.

It was his daughter Georgina who'd insisted that he go into the home. (Yes, he'd been expecting a boy, but when a girl came along, he thought he could nickname her George and everything would be fine. Unfortunately, all her friends and relatives, including his late wife, had called her Gina, a name that he wasn't keen on. It reminded him of that rich woman.)

At the time, George was still feeling a bit depressed. His expertise was not needed, and he hadn't planned for his retirement. So he reluctantly agreed to go, on the understanding that his physiotherapy was likely to be successful. When he regained the proper use of his right side, he would return home. Georgina was a dutiful daughter and would have looked after him at home until he recovered, but she lived and worked in Melbourne.

George wasn't really sure what he intended when he ran away. It was just after lunch – the usual drab, but not unpalatable sandwich- and he found himself on the street on a pleasant autumn afternoon. There was a bus stop at the end of the street, so he thought he might see where a bus might take him. He hadn't been on a bus for years. He did have an allocated parking spot at work. If he used public transport at all, the train station was a short walk from his home.

Anyway, he boarded the first bus that came along. As it happened, it was going to the city and, to his surprise, it was a double-decker. He thought they'd disappeared years ago but apparently they'd recently been re-introduced. It was with a slight sense of excitement that he ascended the top deck and made his way to a seat right at the front. He recalled the pleasure he had felt as a small boy, looking out on the road and traffic below and pretending to drive the bus.

He alighted at the terminus in the city and, realising that he was close to his former place of work, strolled casually down the street towards it. George hadn't been into the city since his retirement but, from the outside, his old workplace looked much the same, except for the change to the company's name. *Morrow and Morrow Conveyancing* had become *Properties "R" Us*.

George had been with the Morrrows- Mr and Mrs- for nearly forty years. He became close friends with the family and had been an almost indispensable expert on conveyancing law.

Unfortunately, the Morrrows were childless. When they decided to retire, with no-one to carry on the business, they looked to sell. If he'd had the wherewithal, George might have bought it but, at his age, he wasn't prepared to borrow to do so. The company was bought by an American firm which, in the name of efficiency, decided to replace the older, more costly staff with younger, cheaper versions. George was made redundant. He liked to say he'd retired. It sounded better.

Curious to see what other changes there might have been, he went into the foyer. In place of the slightly dilapidated armchairs were tubular steel-framed vinyl chairs. Paintings uncannily like the chairs hung in place of the landscape paintings of the Morrow's days. Incongruously, there was a long, curved timber counter, more suited to a hotel reception area. Behind the counter was a woman who reminded him of an air hostess – coldly attractive, with her hair done in a tight bun. "Can I help you?" she said, in a voice in keeping with her appearance.

"I used to work here," said George, "I just wanted to see if the place had changed".

He was saved from further discourse when a voice behind him exclaimed, "George". He turned to see a petite Asian lady smiling at him.

"Angela." He was genuinely pleased to see her. She had been his protégé in his final years at the place and had very quickly acquired a lot of his expertise.

"Have you got time for a chat?" she asked.

George nodded and she ushered him to a small meeting room in the now open office. They exchanged the usual pleasantries – enquired into each other's health, remarked on the beautiful weather- when Angela suddenly blurted out "I could do with some help." She pushed some papers across the table. "No-one here knows anything about this."

He was secretly pleased to have his expertise rekindled, and scanned the papers quickly, unaware of her slight smile. "Yes," he said, "a bit complicated, but I'm sure you can handle it." He went on to explain how she might approach it.

She nodded, smiling appreciatively. She liked George – a lot – but, quite properly, had always hidden how she felt. For his part, George hadn't realised until now, also quite properly, just how attractive she was. There was a short silence while both absorbed the situation. Then she exclaimed "I have to get back to work on this", and, after a brief hesitation, "can we get together for a drink after work?"

Somewhat non-plussed, he stammered his agreement. She suggested a wine bar nearby. As he walked out, he waved a cheery goodbye to the receptionist and wandered slowly up the street towards the wine bar. The limp was hardly noticeable.

His face broke into a smile. "I'm going to miss dinner," he thought.

Manna from Heaven

Anya NIELSON

On a warm autumn day in a side street of inner city Adelaide, not far from well to do suburbs, a group of volunteers prepared for the lunchtime crowd. The difference between this church funded establishment and other eateries nearby was that in this place, no one paid. It was a soup kitchen.

“Open the doors, Nola,” Shirley announced.
“Here they come, all manner under Heaven.”

“You shouldn’t say that, Shirley, they can’t help it.”

“True, but if they weren’t addicted to drugs and alcohol they wouldn’t be here. We’re just feeding them, not curing them.”

Nola Cavendish, a conservatively dressed, middle-aged woman, had the job of ushering in the patrons and making them feel welcome even though they were filthy dirty and smelled of urine and cheap wine. They stumbled in with foul language, anger and dismay, bruised and battered from street fights and sleeping rough. They were physically and mentally beaten but some simply struggled with hunger because of unemployment. Men and women, old and young, they were from a variety of backgrounds with sad stories of poor mental health and domestic violence. These were the shunned and avoided remnants of our so-called affluent society. Mostly they just needed a helping hand.

Shirley Gribble, a well-educated woman with grown up children, was retired. She had loads of spare time. She’d worked in a voluntary capacity at Manna from Heaven for more than 10 years. She was responsible for sourcing the food and developing nutritional menus that suited the palate of her unique clientele. Funds were small but appetites were large, and her responsibility was to stretch resources to satisfy the needs of the people. Shirley loved being in charge

of the small team of workers and like a mother hen, enjoyed conversing with the regular diners, whom she called her ‘little chickens’.

The rooster, her husband Jack, did the driving. He drove Shirley to market to buy meat, fruit and vegetables and to appointments with retailers and large organisations to ‘encourage’ them to help with either money or food. The bakery next door provided day-old bread and cakes, while the local coffee bar helped out with beverages. Everywhere she went Jack drove his Ute, often piled high with goods from the market.

Then one terrible day, in the unbearable summer heat that Adelaide suffers, Jack developed excruciating chest pain. At first he blamed it on the heat. Finally, an ambulance was called. Although it arrived promptly, by the time Jack was wheeled into the hospital he was pronounced dead. Shirley’s world fell apart. After 40 years of marriage she was torn from her mainstay—her rock, her love and her reason for living—gone forever.

Nola stepped in as relieving manager and together with the workers, kept things going at Manna from Heaven. The regulars and the staff wondered if Shirley would come back. She didn’t drive. Never learned. Jack was always there. They did everything together. He fetched and carried while Shirley organised—managed staff, the finances and food. It was their life.

For a while, the other volunteers took turns to drive her. However, Shirley knew this was a short-term fix and that ultimately she was not irreplaceable, even though they’d need two or three people to do her job.

Shirley knew what she must do.

At age 71, Shirley, commenced driving lessons. It was tedious, nerve-racking and awfully demeaning when she couldn't remember the simplest things the instructor had told her. She had no options because her grown up kids were too busy with their own lives to help.

"Mum, you've left your run a bit late," said her son.

Her daughter had a suggestion. "Can you ask one of your friends to help, or are they too old as well?"

Shirley was not so easily swayed. *What's age got to do with it?* She ground her teeth. *I'll show them, I'll show them all.*

The day of the dreaded driving test arrived. Shirley walked into the Motor Registry, mumbling mileages and various other data under her breath. She cleared her throat several times and tapped her fingers on her bag as she waited to be called.

"Shirley Gribble?" She heard her name announced by a young man who appeared no older than her grandson. He looked somewhat disconcerted as she approached. "Hello, I'm Phil," he said smiling. "Is Shirley not here?"

"I'm Shirley."

He looked at his paperwork again. "Oh, I beg your pardon, Mrs Gribble, it's just that I'm used to testing teenagers. You've already passed the written exam so, you're halfway there. Come this way. Don't be nervous. It'll all be fine."

Beads of perspiration formed on Shirley's brow as they climbed into her late-model, automatic car. She pursed her lips and held her enemy—the steering wheel, with a vice-like grip, while she said a silent prayer.

"Drive straight along here, then take the fourth street on your right," said Phil.

It was a simple enough request and Shirley began to relax as she followed Phil's directive. "When you are halfway down the street, pull over and complete a three point turn," he instructed.

The side street turned out to be a narrow lane. Shirley took a deep breath, grit her teeth once more and with unwavering concentration, completed the task. Then it was time for the dreaded reverse park. Phil was a tough examiner. He had her park behind a car and then between two cars. That was the last hurdle, and to her own surprise, she mastered it with calm precision.

Back at the registry Phil shook Shirley's hand. "Congratulations," Mrs Gribble. "Well done. You are my oldest, new driver. It seems that age really has nothing to do with it."

Dating; Senior Style

Narelle NOPPERT

In Australia between 2006 and 2016, the largest age group to divorce was 65 year olds and over. Does that surprise?

At a time when you had hoped to settle into retirement with a partner you expected to spend your life with, many baby boomers, including myself, found themselves alone.

“Oh, I’d love to be on my own!” many an unhappy wife told me, without the slightest comprehension of the realities. Grrrr! You can expect to lose dearly financially; friends and in-laws that you had become attached to, change your abode and in many cases change jobs or pick up a second job, as I did. This was as well as facing a community where sympathy was never equal to that of a widowed woman.

Now, this is not a pity party! My case was my choice, staying married wasn’t an option; however I had no idea of the difficult road ahead.

The 1950’s dream to marry and live happily; to find a man to take care of you for the rest of your life, plus growing up without divorce in extended families, made it necessary to adjust my expectations.

Earlier, in the 1980’s, my failed attempt to leave the marriage, can be put squarely on financial difficulties and the lack of knowing any divorced women. It is a time when a mentor could guide you through the roller coaster ride ahead. These days it’s easy to find others in similar positions, which, as a group become the support network you hoped for from the partner you left.

Now dating is scary thing for anyone who may not have dated for 20 or 30 years! It is fraught with experiences both good and not-so; a journey from ‘green’ to ‘worldly’. I felt lonely, so in my early senior years after I had settled into my new home, worked hard to recoup my losses, I yearned for companionship. Having single friends was great, but nothing compared to having a sweetheart.

I had an invitation to a singles’ dance from a kind lady in my block of units. This is where my courage and ingenuity stepped in. Pondering the fear of going out at night with someone I didn’t know well, and before I had a mobile phone, I devised a plan to protect myself should the evening go pear shaped! I carefully pinned a \$50 note into my underwear, an emergency solution should my bag be stolen or if I needed to find my own way home. The evening turned out to be very enjoyable and I gradually became comfortable moving in single circles. Besides dancing, hours were spent talking with others whose stories although different, shared the same pain and loss.

Rock and roll lessons came next, a healthy pastime I really enjoyed. I started with my divorced male neighbour, Alf. There was no romance between Alf and me but we shared both tears and laughter. Alf felt like a younger brother, and was dotty over blondes. Although we went to dances together I had to harshly remind him that if he wanted a lift home he wasn’t to leave me sitting alone while he followed some blonde-bobbed woman around like a drooling puppy.

Alf's sense of humour was entertaining but embarrassing; it wasn't uncommon for him to introduce me to new friends with 'this is my friend', she is on day release' or 'did you know she dated Hitler?'; or something equally outrageous. All I could do was giggle and object.

Alf started online dating and I was surprised when he met some nice women. He talked me into giving it a go so with his expertise, I braved it. There was one hairy experience, but generally they were nice men I didn't connect with. Online wasn't for me. I went on dates with single men I met at dances, finding nice friends rather than romance. As time went on, a few more dates, some hopes and some hurt. One fellow, I called a good-time friend, disappeared when I became unwell.

Line dancing came next and I didn't need a partner!

The time came when I wanted to settle down and come to terms with a life alone in spite of the well-meanings '*there is always someone for everyone*'. Yes, true, I certainly suffered 'marriage envy' from time to time, but I decided the journey to that goal was paved with potholes. I had a nice home and life with lovely friends, some widowed, some married but didn't feel the odd one out. Having said that, in my early sixties romance came into my life again, it roller-coasted for a number of years until I pulled the plug. I didn't need the pain!

Now in my seventies, I believe my life experiences have well-rounded me. I gained confidence from the hurdles I have crossed, and have the knowledge that as a senior I could still be attractive to the opposite sex. I love that I am the driving-force in my own life and a recent injury showed the support I could expect from friends, both male and female. I love my home and enjoy my garden; have a wonderful family, good health and opportunities for travel, social groups and hobbies, including recently joining zoom courses.

The many years I spent feeling I needed to fit into the norm of being a couple, was only part of my journey. It is a good option if you have it but a happy single life, no less normal or rewarding. Society has become accepting of romance for seniors, but heartbreak is no less painful. Gladly this is a new normal I had not witnessed in my growing years. Some things do improve with time.

So whether you are alone or married and simply enjoying the opportunities retirement provides 'what's age got to do with it?'

The Shoes

Yvonne NORRIS

Maddie is my very best friend and we have lived near to each other all our lives. We grew up together, married, had families and shared good and bad times. But now our families have all scattered and we both are retired widows. We own our own apartments and I share mine with my little house dog Donty. We have lots of friends but every Saturday morning we go shopping and have lunch. It is our special time for just the two of us to be together.

We have always gotten on well even though we are very different people in our manner and personality. Maddie is introverted and inclined to penny pinch. She has worn her brown hair in a bobbed style for many years, wears comfortable brogues and her frocks always cover her knees. I, on the other hand, am extroverted and tend to regret my often impulse buying. My hair is long, blonde and curly permed. I wear clothes that are often too young for me (so Maddie is always telling me) and even in my senior years still have a fetish for shoes.

In the course of the last few weeks that we have been shopping I have noticed a lovely pair of blue Jimmy Choo shoes sitting in his store window. They are strappy and stilt heeled and the price tag shows \$600. I just know they would look fabulous with the white chiffon dress and blue hat and bag I have purchased to wear to my granddaughter's upcoming wedding. So this week I have decided to try them on.

It is Maddie's turn to drive us today so after she picked me up and headed along the highway I told her of my intention. Horrified, and lucky that there were no cars behind us, she slammed on the brakes. "\$600 Jimmy Choo shoes at your age!!!"

"But they are beautiful," I said.

"Well, please yourself," she harrumphed as she put the car into gear and took off.

When we arrived at the shopping centre, as Maddie wanted to buy some warm nightgowns and bed socks (winter was still three months away) we went to the Target store first. After that we went to the chemist so she could buy some vitamin tablets. "All us oldies should take some," she remarked as she paid on the way out. I ho-hummed to myself and ignored her.

I then took her by the elbow and steered her towards the shoe shop. As soon as I put the blue shoes on my feet I knew they were meant for me. "They look very flimsy and frivolous to me" was Maddie's remark. Again I ignored her. Feeling very happy I purchased the shoes (I just had to have them) and suggested that we go and have some lunch.

After a nice lunch we lingered there for a long time discussing the past week's events in our lives, enjoying each other's company. Following that we went to the supermarket and bought our weeks supply of groceries and went home both feeling a little tired.

At home after unpacking my groceries, I had a last look at my lovely blue shoes and put them in the bottom of my wardrobe with lots of other shoes.

A couple of days later I again took the Jimmy Choo shoes from their box and slid them on to my feet. Just then, the front door chimed. I opened it to find a man standing there. I told him that whatever he was selling I didn't need, but as I did so Donty rushed out the door.

Pushing the man aside I ran after him but as I reached the top step, slipped on the tiles and tumbled down. I screamed as I lay there on my back, my right ankle twisted and already swelling. Donty was licking my face as the shocked stranger tried to lift me up. "Just leave me and get help," I begged of him as my neighbour came out to see what all the fuss was about. One look at my ankle and she rang the ambulance. She also rang Maddie and advised her of my predicament and took Donty into her care. The stranger just disappeared.

Maddie followed the ambulance to the hospital and naturally admonished me again about my 'Jimmy Choo' shoes.

After an operation to place a pin in my badly injured ankle and weeks of recuperation and physiotherapy I realised that I would never be able to wear the blue shoes. Maddie said that maybe her young niece might like them so she gladly took them from me.

Time passed and my life got back to normal. One Saturday morning as once again I waited for Maddie to pick me up, I expectantly looked out my front window and saw a stylish, attractive looking woman walking up the front pathway. Her arms and legs were tanned, her hair the colour of copper, her face carefully made up. She was wearing a short blue floral frock and blue shoes. My eyes travelled back up from the shoes to the face again. Surprised, I realised it was Maddie. She was wearing my Jimmy Choo shoes. I ran out the door to meet her. We hugged each other and I stood back and looked at her closely. "You look wonderful for your age now Maddie" I cried "I hardly recognised you"

"Well" she said "before I gave your shoes away I tried them on and something magical happened. I felt young again, happy and alive with energy. I went shopping and bought some new clothes. I went to the beauty salon and had a makeover and now I've called in to tell you that I won't be going shopping with you today as I have met a wonderful man and he is taking me out to lunch and anyway, what has age got to do with it? I knowingly nodded my head.

The Big Debate

Margaret ONUS

The annual Big Debate at our Nan's Aged Care home was scheduled, but Covid restrictions were severe in Sydney and we couldn't visit. Today was her momentous day, to be the final speaker arguing that 'My age defines me'. She had been prepping for weeks, anxious to support the team well. Nan was a talented woman, who was a great debater in her school days, so the skills were well honed in her memory bank.

We and other family members, gathered on the lawn outside, watching the debaters inside as if in a fishbowl. We were grateful that management had offered zoom for our mobile devices.

The recreation staff, all masked, assisted the debaters to be socially distant and settled, while the moderator called the group to order, and clearly explained the Oxford debate process for the day. He introduced the first speaker on the topic, who quickly found his form. "Short answer, everything. Age has been important in my journey," said Bill Smith, in a sharp voice. He didn't need a microphone, after all his years of practice in the army. His shiny bald head caught the light as he oriented to the audience with his sonar glasses giving him auditory feedback. He knew there was a crowd and he would not need to be concerned for his ailing wife, Flossie. "Why, at age 17, my age was important as I could sign up, but age 18 was sweet, legitimate drinking and acceptance from the blokes. They were life milestones. So, there is the first point, age has defined my life from teenage years, thank you."

He sat down heavily in his seat, which had been carefully placed on the small podium, so he could remain safe throughout the debate. His assistance dog settled under the chair. The ex-service mates in the group cheered for the army cause.

Myra Plum wearing red framed glasses perched on her nose was quick to get to her feet and up to the microphone. She declared, "My colleague argues his age has been of consequence, however, what age do we fall in love? Or have our first disappointment? I say age is not defining in life's rich tapestry, these events can come upon one at any age, and are part of life's journey." The front row audience clapped keenly, knowing this truth.

The next speaker, once on the podium, gave a small bow as his jet-black hair bobbed around his face, "My age was critical to gain the pension and don't we all know it. My friends, now that I am aged, my children give me respect and honour, as they know parents have gained much wisdom and life experience." The wider audience could be seen to be nodding in agreement.

Following on was another gentleman for the opposing view. As he approached the stage, he seemed confident. He placed his walking stick to the side of the chair, and said, "It is not age but rather circumstances. Facebook, was invented by a youngster, at just 20 years of age, and this has changed the way we all interact with the world. He has also made his own world. He was skilled, saw a window of opportunity and the rest is history. We can't deny him his success."

There was a pause, while a few considered Zuckerberg, his contribution and mutterings could be heard, "Rich kid" and "Money grabber" but quickly settled as our Nan, the final speaker for the affirmative team came up to the podium. Her lucky coloured beads around her neck sparkled, and with the microphone held firmly her opinion boomed out, "I support the case that my age does define me, as a depression raised kid, I have always been extremely thrifty and resilient. The audio feed suddenly dropped out and we lost the rest of her wisdom. With the sound restored we heard "As a nonagenarian, I believe I have passed already to a good age and I am aiming for 100."

Nan clicked the microphone off and her friends applauded. We cheered for her too.

The final speaker, for the opposing view stood, she pushed her shiny walking frame up to the platform. With a little cough, she launched off, "Age is just a number, it is how you present that is more important, how you keep your attitude fresh, your mind sharp and your body moving. I look around today and see we are very diverse. Why I have traded pushing a cleaning trolley for years for this walking trolley. I just need a young inventor to add a mobile phone holder and computer chip programme so the walker can know the way, then I will never be lost between the hostel dining room and the front gate." The staff present, chuckled. "So, in summary, it is what you do and how you do it that defines you."

The moderator pressed the button on his recliner chair and it whirred into action, raising him to his feet, "Ladies and gentleman, in the Oxford tradition, we adjudicate this debate by requesting you please move to the respective side of the hall to show your view, right for the affirmative, left for the opposing view, as he pointed to the large coloured sign boards. Seats scraped, walkers wheeled and shoes shuffled as the group of seniors, rearranged themselves, finally there were twelve to the left, twelve to the right, and Flossie Smith remained seated, nodding in her winged-back chair. The moderator smiled, "Teams," he said, "we do not have an outcome, the remaining listener needs convincing."

Bill's dog walked up to the quiet figure, licked at her hands, and she rose and headed towards Bill. "Thank you for your excellent participation everyone and the Affirmative Team have gained the majority today," declared the moderator, as the group cheered and chatted, then flowed away for a scrumptious morning tea of fresh scones, with jam and cream.

Outside, we wished in vain to join with Nan for morning tea.

Eight to Eighty...?

Faye W. OWEN

As a child I loved nature. I would lie face down, peering through gaps in the grass, studying the scurrying ants, following their endless activity along paths from domed sandy nests to dead insect beneath tangled stems, shouldering the burden, rallying reinforcements to help transport the load to the nest to feed the colony.

Bees fascinated me, with their whirring, buzzing, fanning wings, circular flight patterns and devotion to duty, as they landed in the bell-like tube of pollen-filled flower, emerging coated in gold to fly off and pollinate the neighbouring blossoms glowing in the sunshine.

I was morbidly attracted to snails; the delicate, curled, fragile shell of the snail, so intricate! But salt, I discovered, liberally sprinkled, produced a writhing, frothing green foam! Sometimes, for a child, fascination overcomes horror!

And spiders! Intriguing, varied, from the little 'money spider' which happily crawled over my hand. 'You might come into some money if you find a money spider', the St Andrew's Cross with crucifix web, spindly Daddy Longlegs of story fame, and enormous spreading Huntsman or 'Triantiwontigongalope' clinging to the weatherboards.

The danger lay in the Redback, found everywhere; under sheets of galvo Dad had piled along the fence, in the garden or, worst of all, in the outside loo! But all fascinating!

Trees wound their roots around my heart; a love fostered by our grade five teacher, Mr David Leithhead, with nature rambles around the large, treed playground, savouring the tangy aroma of Lemon-scented Gum, still my favourite eucalypt, exploring the rough texture of Iron Barks, crunching fragrant Camphor Laurel leaves, searching for square twigs on a particular gum, whose name now eludes me.

At my home, bird life consisted mainly of pee-wees, cheeky willy-wagtails, magpies and kookaburras. Willy was my favourite, with endlessly swaying tail swishing defiance at danger, hopping daringly under the feet of the neighbour's pony, skittering on clothes lines, chirruping away, daring us to catch him!

Children have fertile imaginations, when allowed to indulge them. Between our weatherboard walls and the paling fence, a narrow walkway always wore moss on path and palings.

My secret world, inhabited by fairies! These 'fairy rings' of moss I kept scrupulously devoid of debris for nightly dancing of the elfin creatures who dwelt in this precious, enchanted scene. I never *quite* saw a fairy, but sometimes I discerned a diaphanous shadow fleeing swiftly as I turned to discover it! I lived in a magical, make-believe world.

My books were largely fairy tales. My delight was daydreaming.

Who am I now? In my childish way from about eleven, I wrote poems and stories.

Music featured largely in my life. Both my sisters played piano, we listened to LP (long playing) records, and music on radio. I learned violin. Music is still a major part of my life. My world would not be complete without the strains of music wafting through the home.

I'm now eighty-one, no longer believe in fairies. I do however have other visions, other daydreams which are, no doubt, quite as improbable.

I enjoy a wide variety of much loved feathered friends; currently, shy rosellas, brilliant rainbow lorikeets, striking king parrots, Aussie minors, occasional honey-eaters hovering over the bottlebrush, satin bower birds stealing blue pegs from the line, fussy doves, the melodious calls of the butcher bird, and hosts of tiny wings fluttering high in stretching eucalypts behind the fence. Their music fills my morning, their presence lifts my heart. They add wonder and joy to my day. Lately, from the she-oak, two huge, channel-billed cuckoo chicks are duping currawong parents with their raucous squawking for food. A much less musical sound, but still intriguing!

I collect odd plumes dropped from my avian visitors, wondering how lorikeet feathers can be bi-coloured so precisely. What artist has painted these patterns so perfectly to plan, ensuring the completed design?

Myriad bees buzz in my camellia bushes, still fascinating as I garner floral gems, enjoying their company. Native bees zip from plant to plant; colourful butterflies flutter in drunken pattern from bush to bush.

Most profuse of all are the spiders. Everywhere! I'm constantly festooned with sticky webs entangled in my hair. A simple trip to the letter box garners three of them!

I write verse upon verse about spiders, their intricate, marvellous, amazing webs, pour out innumerable poems lauding birds in flight; my greatest blessing, a pair of brahminy kites who wheel in graceful circles above me, filling me with almost inexpressible delight, and tumbling that sheer thrill of their mastery of the air onto paper!

Trees are still precious friends, from straight, towering gums to gnarled, curled mangroves, soaking their roots in the brine. I don't think I could live in a world without trees.

Wordsworth told us, 'The child is father to the man'. My childhood loves still bless me, childhood affinity with nature now extols its wonder in verse, music still fills my life.

So, how have I changed? Gained maturity one would hope, become a little less naïve in this adventure called 'Life'. Yet those childhood passions have fashioned me, blossoming now as poems from a grateful heart. I am still that child, still me, with all my zest for exploring the intricacies of the life we share with the world around us.

The wonder of Creation still amazes me, fills me with awe. Age is of no consequence, whether eight or eighty! Eyes to see, an open heart and an open mind are all we need.

My longing is for every child to be filled with such wonder, overflowing, bringing a fountain of rich joy to this precious, precious life we are given!

The Magic of Cake

Barry PENFOLD

John Rogan was 72. Divorced and living alone which he did not like for the most part but he had managed to convince himself it was for the better. No more arguments with the ex (well almost none) but his daughter was now the antagonist. Only ringing when she wanted something, just like now. His granddaughter was on her way for a night stopover because his daughter had no other choice – or words to that effect. He felt ostracised from everyone who he framed as Family. A bit of an afterthought. Invited only on the basis of his former status, and as the years go by it would no doubt become less.

He was not good with kids. He knew he was seen by his grandkids as a bit of a grump 'Grumpy Grand pop'. Nothing really good would come out of this stay and in some ways the introduction of iPads and online games was a blessing. Sit them down and let them go. They knew all about them and very little was said. No real difference to his days when he was allowed to be seen but not heard.

The sound of closing car doors was upon him a little sooner than he had expected. He saw the approach of his daughter and granddaughter through the lounge window. He opened the door and his daughter was in before there was a hello. "Dad, Bec has her Ipad and a change of clothes. Must go. See you tomorrow."

Bec was completely non plussed. She quickly recovered. "Hi Pop, although I have my iPad I was thinking we could do something else." John's panic was palpable. This was not expected. Not part of his script. What on earth could he do? Play ball- God she was not a dog. She was 8 years old with an ever-enquiring mind. He was not up to her continuous questions and he knew his tag of Grumpy Pop would be realised.

There was nothing in the old makeshift toy box which could do the job. It was in need of an update to the bin. A quick scan of his surroundings did not provide the immediate answer. The building of a Tent Fort, so popular with his grandson was not the way to go. But, the building or making of something?

"Pop can I have something to eat?" He moved to the pantry and reached for an old biscuit tin and there it was- the solution, the saviour- all packaged for immediate use – Cake Mix.

He yelled into the pantry, "Bec how about making a cake?" The response was a little slow in reaching him and he was concerned that it was an idea that had already been dismissed. He need not have worried as when he turned he almost crushed Bec between his legs as she too had become interested in his rummaging of the pantry.

"God, Bec take it easy. Have you ever made a Cake?"- Bec already had the packet and was reading the instructions out loud: "For cake you need: 1 egg, 150ml of water ... Pop can we do it please?"

He was moved to a smile. He had never made a cake in his life, although, he had many times wanted to do so. "Bec it is a carrot cake so it should be good for both of us."

"Has it got icing?" enquired Bec. Without any further hesitation the search for bowls and baking tins was on with gusto. He did have a lot of kitchen bits and pieces and Bec immersed herself into the lower pantry cupboard with a mission to search and provide. He was able to gather the ingredients and lay them on the kitchen bench. The mixing bowl and baking tin arrived with a crash but still intact.

Bec again read the instructions, asking for help at times, and at the end said, "This will be fun Pop. Mum said you were too old to have fun." John was tempted to criticise his daughter but let it go.

"Well let's prove to her that age has nothing to do with it."

"Yeah let's do that Pop." And so it began.

In went the cake mix, egg, water and vegetable oil and Bec worked the wooden spoon like there was no tomorrow. John had a few turns. The resultant batter splashed onto the kitchen bench, the floor and their faces. It was a hoot and for the first time in a long time John was having fun. Amazingly, there was still enough batter to go into the bake tin and into the oven.

They both waited, talking about how good it would taste and sharing a spoon to 'clean' the mixing bowl. The wafting aromas of the cooking cake shifted through the house and their chatter continued until the ring of the telephone intruded upon their fun.

John picked up the phone. It was his daughter and they spoke briefly. He placed the handset down before speaking to Bec. "That was your Mum. She said she would be picking you up later than expected. I told her that was good because we had another cake to make. What flavour for the next one?"

"Chocolate," came the reply.

John delighted in how a few hours and a packet of Cake mix had transformed not only his attitude but his relationship with his granddaughter. Indeed it was Magic.

Stand Like A Tree

Robert PHILLIPS

I lean over the rail, still wet with dew, cold to touch, and quite out of place in the soft garden setting. Four swimmers, mostly in wet suits, churn or glide along the lap pool on the lower level. As usual Peter is doing his training laps. He has lived in our community on the Parramatta River for as long as I have and now has his whole extended family involved in ocean swimming.

He corkscrews into a backstroke and sees me. "You're late," he shouts. "Bronwen went in five minutes ago." She always does; someone has to be second in the shower. I doubt he hears my pithy reply; Peter takes off his hearing aids and puts in his 'ear' plugs at 6.30 each morning.

I descend the stairs to the recreation area and turn left into the community room. Today the strains of River of Life are being absorbed by six regulars. No-one looks around as I sneak in and take up a position at the back of the room. I place my bottle of water within arm's reach, slip off my open-toed sandals and stand like a tree. I rather like trying to dig my toes into the polished ceramic tiles, and stretching myself so that the top of my head touches the sky.

I 'ease' my way into the mood of Qi Gong, adjusting my position so I can get a better view of the big screen where Qi Gong Master 'Joe' dressed in floppy, purple, silk pants and top, gazes lovingly at the audience he cannot see, and invites us all to stretch our bodies, our minds and our souls.

I'll swear he is standing in Centennial Park. I know I am supposed to clear my mind and be meditative, but everything reminds me of something else these days. As a high school boy, I played cricket in Centennial Park, and that tree there, that melaleuca, the one with the strips of bark falling gracefully off it, I know it. I swear that after matches at McKay Oval, I rested under it, sitting on my canvas bag with the cricket gear in it, watching the ducks on that pond behind Joe. Better to be out for the ducks than out for a duck; my mantra during cricket season.

That tree, grey with red and brown slashes, is solid and gnarled, not spindly like the poplars to the left of screen, or yet to be proven, like the new flame trees, with the wire cages around them. I know melaleucas from a hundred different golf courses. "Mostly air in the top reaches," golfers say, before they try to hit through a confusion of tangled large limbs. Melaleucas are defiant. They are not easily breached. They dig in and hold on.

I am immersed in soft, gentle exercise. Joe is prompting us; "Row the boat" and I stand shirtless astride, the pea pod going up the Shennong stream, opposite Bedong on the North side of the Yangtse River. I pole us forward with sinewy arms and well-muscled legs, while our female tour-guide sings with a voice like a sparrow, the traditional songs, the *hao zi*, of the Yangtse boatmen. Strong backs were what powered the cargo before motors and I was bending mine now. There is neither cotton nor tobacco between myself and the video screen, but there is a young Chinese Australian, affectionately known as CK. Released from his commute by Covid-19, and freed from his desk at home, his movements are fluid, his transitions are smooth and his breathing is rhythmic. He exercises effortlessly, gracefully and peacefully.

Has he seen what happens when the water in the streams which feed the Yangtse becomes shallow and the pebbles grow larger and the rapids swirl? Will he ever see the boatmen, surely none of them younger than seventy, hop from their boats onto the *cat path* alongside the river and, still smoking, haul the inert cargo, or shame-faced tourists, up the river, against the rushing waters?

Kylie, who is alongside me, is a mid-twenties graphic artist, with no work commitments on Mondays and Thursdays. Kylie is the best stretcher in the group, but if I were to stand on my toes like she does when we *become* wild geese, my fragile Achilles tendon would ensure a stretcher followed hard on the heels of the stretch.

“The archer fires his arrow,” prompts Joe. I take my stance. I am on the banks of a stream which runs into the Tua River in the highlands of Papua-New Guinea. I am pulling on a reed string on a roughly fashioned, black-tree, long-bow. It is tough. My arms tremble with the demand the activity places on my skinny frame. I know some men of the Chimbu tribe and they love to one-up Australians. They fall about laughing at my initial ineptitude; frequently the arrows just drop insipidly off the bow. We all cheer and back-slap when I finally manage to plant one across the stream.

A twinge in the rotator cuff pulls me back to the present. We fly like doves, we glare like tigers, and we push against waves. When we are asked to assume the horse-riding position, I take my cues, not from the video, but from our most recent member, Emma, who still owns a farm. She sits on a horse where there is none to sit.

I finish the session in a near trance, *at one with the universe*. The music stops, I open my eyes. There is a round of, “See you next week”, and we depart our sanctuary. We have all stretched our bodies, our minds and our souls, although probably not to the same degree in all three dimensions.

Peter is sitting on the edge of the pool, sunning himself.

“How was it, Aquaman?” I ask. “Oh, alright, until the white-line fever got me. Did you stand like a tree?”

“You bet,” I reply. “A melaleuca.”

Wine Tasting Has a Lot to Recommend it

Clive PICKERING

Some 40 years ago my wife and I accompanied friends on a two- day wine tasting holiday in the scenic Hunter Valley of New South Wales, Australia. This famous grape producing area is world renown for its fabulous wineries and we set out to do justice to the wines of this region.

My wife, not being much of a drinker, kindly volunteered to be the designated driver for the sojourn. At one winery there was a bric-a-brac shop attached to the complex and while my friends and I were focused on arduous task of tasting the various wines on offer my wife, seeking respite, did a tour of the shop. After a time, and feeling a tad guilty, I went to see how she was. I asked her if she had found anything of interest, she nodded and led me to a cardboard box that contained a fancy wooden clock case all in pieces.

The bored female shop assistant honed in on what she perceived as prospective customers and proceeded to explain that in point of fact the box contained a genuine antique treasure! It was, albeit in bits, an original American steam pressed oak gingerbread clock. All sections of the clock's case were there but unfortunately the old animal glue that held the case together had deteriorated over the years and the case had fallen apart. We were assured the clock's movement and all its relevant bits were also present in the box and that the sorry lot was just awaiting a competent woodworker to glue the case back together, service the movement and have, forever more, a valuable antique treasure.

Fortified with liquid courage I puffed out my chest and informed the sales woman that I indeed had the requisite skills for such a delicate task and that I would be just the man to undertake the challenge of returning the clock to its former glory. I paid out the princely sum of 30 dollars, the shop assistant beamed, and the box of clock bits became mine.

Little did I know how that moment in time would change my life forever. Not only had I had just purchased my first antique clock, I had also taken my very first tentative step in a long and thoroughly enjoyable journey into the heady world of horology. Aroused within was a passion for antique clocks! The next day however and with a much clearer head, I recall looking at the sorry box of bits that I had paid 30 dollars for and thinking self what have you gone and done here?

Fortunately my hobby at that time was antique furniture restoration and I possessed the know-how as well as the skills to clean up the old case and glue it back together. I was rather pleased with the way the case cleaned up and I was also rather taken with the clock's transfer- covered glazed front door. Soon I had the case restored and ready for its missing movement. I knew nothing about clock mechanisms and so I was forced to seek out someone who would assist me with fixing the clock movement. After asking around I was given the name of a chap who lived half a mile from me who fixed clocks. The chap's name, was Alf and I spoke with him over the phone and arranged to take the movement around to his house so that he could examine it and let me know what would be required to get it working.

Meeting Alf that afternoon was the start of a friendship that endures to this day. Alf was most obliging and he explained that the movement was from the Ingram Clock Company of America and that it was in surprisingly good condition requiring only a clean and a lubrication to have it working once again. Three days later Alf returned the movement and helped me fit it into the restored case. He showed me how to fit the pendulum and get the clock in beat. And just like that I had my first antique clock.

With my interest piqued it was not very long before I had purchased a second and a subsequent third antique clock and developed a fondness for tinkering with and restoring these old timely treasures. I began to look for ways of increasing my humble collection.

I soon realised that it was far too expensive to purchase genuine horological items in pristine condition. In a 'eureka' moment however, I decided to employ my woodworking skills and build replacement cases for orphaned clock movements. I discovered that many grandfather clock movements that had become separated from their original cases for a host of reasons were available for purchase in the UK.

I have made ten extremely enjoyable visits to the UK to purchase early antique clock movements and have formed very close friendships with a multitude of like-minded enthusiasts and collectors. I have also been invited to do speaking engagements at clock clubs and have been privileged to view several rather important private collections of horological treasures.

To date I have constructed over thirty period style grandfather clocks, several of these for movements over 320 years old. My earliest clock mechanism was made in 1675 and keeps time to within twenty seconds a week. Obviously, for sanity's sake and my desire to stay married to the woman I love, I have not kept all the clocks I have constructed, but I do have an exceptionally fine collection of early English long case clocks as well as a collection of other genres of Antique clocks. Further to this I am well known in the UK and here in Australian Horological circles for the replacement period clock style cases I build.

I believe that I am extremely fortunate to have such a rewarding passion and interest and it has afforded me an enormous amount of pleasure over the years.

Wine tasting has a great deal to recommend it!

Age Is Only a Number – Mine is Unlisted

Jill PLUMMER

Life has ways of teaching you how to cope with many things you would never have thought you could do. Widowed thirteen years ago she would never have imagined that she would have travelled around this great country of Australia to places she had only ever heard of in songs.

So in 2018 at the age of 67 she realised that there must be more to life than get up, work, come home to an empty house, sleep and back on the treadmill and do it over and over again. Feeling that the time was right or maybe not she packed up and headed north to start a new life. Coffs sounded like the place to be so Coffs became her new home. People said you can't do that but she wanted no regrets so she said if I don't try I won't know will I?

A festival in Winton caught her eye and she thought why not, I can do this. So she booked into the tent city there and headed north. The places she had heard in songs became realities like, Goondiwindi, Cunnamulla, Charleville, Blackall, Barcaldine, Longreach. She saw the Tree of Knowledge, Jackie Howe the gun shearer's statue in Blackall to name a few. The outback red dust slowly seemed to impregnate itself into her veins and she found a new love for life in this fascinating part of the country. Why had she taken so long to discover this? The festival was great fun, she met so many new and interesting people and made some new friends. At the end of the festival she drove across to Charters Towers and on the road she saw droving of cattle on the long paddock, some of these were as big as Little Red, it was magical just like the stars at night out there. So many, just like a giant sparkly blanket. The drive down the coast back to Coffs only made her realise that she could do this and so the camping bug was fuelled.

Could she do this with her little red Nissan Micra (Little Red) as there was no 4x4 in the budget? So plan B was born, to use what she had and she hasn't looked back. She has driven along wonderful outback roads, seen the landscape change from suburban to slowly opening into the magic that is the red dust of the outback with all its mystery and wonder, to Winton to the dunny derby, seen the wide open plains where dinosaurs roamed many years ago.

On returning she decided that she would carry out her wish to travel and camp. An awning was added to Little Red and a swag made the perfect setup. It was tested at a country music muster for a week camping in the swag under the awning on little red under the stars.

The essentials have been added now and she can travel and set up in a caravan park easily. On her most recent trip she purchased a small tent drove to Broken Hill, Silverton, Bourke, Cobar, Nyngan a 3,000km round trip. Not bad for a 69 year old eh?

This is my story, from a point in my life where I thought I was never going to feel happy again I have found that if you have dreams follow them, don't put it off. You only get one chance at life so get out there, take a deep breath and take that first step, no matter how small as every journey starts with a step as the saying goes. There will be ups and downs along the way but who knows what you will find. It may not be what you signed up for but you will be amazed at what you can do.

I have met many people on my travels, made new friends. Little Red and I very often cause people to ask 'do you do this on your own'? Answer yes its only me, I have been told I am brave don't know about that, many is the time I have thought to myself what are you doing but then myself tells me get out there, you can do this.

My bucket list still has journeys to tick off, maybe they will, maybe they won't, but I intend to give it a good try while I can.

You only get one chance at life, it doesn't always go how you planned but if you believe you can do it you will.

Hunting for Gold

Rosemary POOLE

When I was eighteen I really wanted to join my older brother Pete, a geology student, on his trip to the outback. He was taking his old Ute and camping equipment and heading off into the bush for two weeks. He said he was looking for ancient rock formations, but I knew him too well. Rock formations? No. He was looking for gold!

I begged and pleaded, promised I'd do all of the washing up, fetching water, and collecting firewood. Not the cooking, he'd experienced that before and swore never again.

I vowed I wouldn't complain about the heat, the flies, or the dust. I'd do everything he said, straight away.

My cajoling finally got the better of him.

"Look," he said. "If I say you can come you must promise me you won't argue, or go off on your own. It's a dangerous place out there. There's snakes and spiders, no water, no signposts, no help. It'll just be you and me."

"I love snakes and spiders. It'll be great, we haven't gone on an adventure since we were kids. Now we can go on a real grown up one."

Eight and twelve years old, we'd spent hours roaming the bush around our farm, sandwiches and lemonade in our bags. No worries about the future, free as the air.

Pete sighed. "I'm not sure. But it would be good to have another person around. Look, the only way I'll let you come is if you learn something about geology first. Then you can really help me."

"Yes, yes I'll do that. There's a course starting here soon. I'll learn all about rocks, you'll see."

He sighed again. He understood *me* too well. But I really intended to try.

After three weeks of class I knew all about Geological Ages. But that didn't tell me where we would find gold. I looked up the area we were going to and even asked the teacher about the geology to be found there. He was thrilled that someone in his class was actually going out to look at rocks. Most of his students were just using 'Beginners' Geology' to look good on college applications.

I didn't tell him we were going to hunt for gold. It didn't seem quite right and I wanted his help. So I asked him the names of the different rock strata, when they were laid down, what the land was like when they formed. All sorts of intelligent things. I even managed to slip in a query about valuable minerals in the area.

"Ah, Ellie," he said, shaking his head. "It all depends on the types of rock and how they were formed. Which in turn depends on their age. Gold is found in old igneous rocks and quartz deposits, iron in younger sedimentary rocks, coal is younger still. You will learn all about this later in the course. In the area you are going to, the rocks are too geologically new to provide much more than dust."

Smiling, he added, "That is not to say though, that older intrusions never occur."

Hope at last. We'd look for intrusions, whatever they were.

So off we set, and it was just as Pete had said. The days were hot and the nights freezing, but I wasn't discouraged. There was shade amongst the boulders of our campsite and plenty of old wood in the dry gullies. Washing up was minimal and I made too much noise for snakes to stay around. Good netting kept out the smaller creepy crawlies.

We'd head off in the mornings with Pete's binoculars and bag of tools, climb up the nearest hill and look over the miles of dry scrub. Then Pete would spot something and off we'd go. He tried to explain how to tell an ancient rock from a merely old one, but I never quite cottoned on. I was still waiting for the first signs of gold.

After three days of this I became impatient.

"Okay Pete, out with it. I know you're not here just to look at old rock. Where's the gold? My teacher says the rocks here are too young to contain quartz deposits."

He looked a bit sheepish.

"I was hoping you wouldn't catch on," Pete replied. "But you're right, most of it is too young. In a few areas though there are intrusions of older, igneous rock that might just contain gold. It all depends on their age. So I thought it would be worth coming out here to have a look."

Suddenly it all became more interesting. We explored every pile of old rocks we could find, digging beneath boulders, hammering at outcrops. But none had the right age and geological combination. My teacher had been right, the landscape was too new. And if there had been gold here, surely someone would have found it long ago.

After ten days we decided to head home early, there was no gold, no old igneous intrusions. But it had been fun reliving our childhood memories, recalling our younger more carefree days. Before the adult concerns of studying and work became so demanding. For us, age had taken away our treasured freedom, our happy adventures. The gold wasn't really important, the time together had been more precious.

Until, that is, we moved our Ute for repacking.

Between the tyre tracks we found a small pebble, with a dirty yellowish sheen. A splash of water, a rub with an old cloth, it glistened in the early sunlight. At last, our first gold nugget. We had finally found an old intrusion amongst the younger rocks, we'd been camping on it all along.

Now at eighty, bones old and creaking, I look back on adventures no longer possible. But wait ... I still have that nugget, I'd love to go and look for more. With a comfortable campervan, strong and capable geologist grandson, why not?

As with geology, age may matter, but I'm definitely not **too old!**

Sempiternity

Beth ROBERTSON

Dear Mamma,

It's Roslyn here, I'm just checking that you have provided for me 'after'. *I mean when you go to line up at the Pearly Gates.*

You've loved me as your only doll for 70 years.

I'm writing from the antique stool in your bedchamber, where I've been sleeping for a decade. Although my glass eyes have fallen back inside my porcelain skull, I still watch your crafty pursuits and continual tossing and turning throughout each night. I wear the baby garments you knitted with leftovers from your granddaughter's layette 21 years ago. They conceal my straw stuffed fabric body, repaired repeatedly over many years.

I'm uneasy that I might be discarded if the removalists ditch everything into a skip bin when you're gone. So, something must be resolved about my future.

My first loving mother was Ethel, born in 1890, who bequeathed me to you in 1949, and you have since been my main carer.

I have never had a birth certificate like those colicky Cabbage Patch dolls who took my place when your daughter Kaylie, was about 10 years old. But I've had moments of love and hugs when her two daughters Molly and Mia, secreted me out of a dusty storage box before being cast-off by them when unhuggable Barbie, and the unwelcome boy Ken, appeared.

So, it's been a dreary few years since my last family babysitter Mia discarded me for other more exciting small real animals to hug. But recently you did take me on a heart-rending outing to a dementia ward, where you had to extract me carefully from a lady who fell in love with me. That was mind blowing.

In the past I have experienced many household relocations around the countryside. I have been thrust into boxes, linen cupboards and dirty trunks and have been rattled along dusty roads to the family's next destination. In your childhood I was hugged, dressed and undressed for much of my waking time as your brothers dug holes, climbed trees and swam in the river.

You were always kind, painting my face and nails with multiple layers of colour as did Kaylie, and later, Molly and Mia. And I've had bed mates like fluffy stuffed dogs, kewpie dolls, teddies and bunnies who have long gone to the charity shops or doll heaven. Other girls had dolls that cried, wet their pants and even had walking legs.

During the damaging floods of 1955, a serendipitous event occurred when I had my first mud bath. After I emerged from the sodden boxes of toys, I was favoured above those unfriendly, stuffed, phoney, and by then, mouldy animals with curious names. And to my delight I dealt good-naturedly with an overflow of emotion from you while you tried to salvage my straw stuffed body. The goat in the backyard survived the flood but kept sniffing at me while I dried in the sun wearing no clothes. At least I wasn't pushed through the mangle on the washing machine and hung with my clothes on the propped-up clothesline with dolly pegs.

One Christmas I received a new bridal outfit handmade by your Mum, but it only lasted momentarily as I hate formal stuff. I obediently held my arms up when you dressed me and even pouted my lips to receive the bright red crayon. The new Shirley Temple style wig was combed and curled continually, much to my amusement.

Fortunately, I suffered no pain after I fell out of a tree getting a broken arm while you were climbing in 1954. And one day your brother imprudently threw me off a billycart, and another scary situation was being held above your head as a magpie swooped. That year I saw Queen Elizabeth in the Dubbo town square and a week later you held me in your arms while the school class photo was taken.

On one country trip I was so thankful that you were not cuddling me when you plummeted out of your Dad's moving T-Model Ford onto the corrugated dirt road. It was so terrifying for me, but by that time, I'd had more stitches than you in my worn body, so I recognised your suffering.

Sadly, I was often used as a disciplinary tactic when your parents withdrew me from your loving clutches, and I was thrown unceremoniously into my vintage wicker pram and left for the appointed time of compulsory isolation.

Miserably, at times I was sheltered from some significant life events. The most disturbing circumstance was when I overheard that a boy had asked you on a date to see the *Sound of Music* in 1965. But you should recall I always kept secrets, as your father never found out about you kissing that boy behind the chook pen.

So, I'm writing to thank you for loving me all of your life. I never contemplate my age, as existence for me is static. My signature look has always been as a baby, but everyone around me has aged and changed, and will expire, as you will one day.

Undoubtedly from my position in the boudoir, I will watch you pass over and then I will long for Kaylie, Molly or Mia to adopt me permanently to rescue me from that skip bin. So my earnest appeal now is for you to notify your beneficiaries of me as one of your most cherished possessions.

Loving and remembering you forever,

Roslyn xx

P.S.

Oh, ignore all of that, as I have just heard from your granddaughter Molly that you will be a great-grandmother, and that I will have a new up-and-coming 'mother' when you've departed! Molly will sign me into the Dolls' Hospital for a digital microchip-controlled set of eyes, and I will have new 3D printer bionic arms and legs. Then I hope Molly's new baby, boy or girl, will love me in the same way as you have always.

Morrison

Lee ROBINSON

A confusion of lights wakes me. Maybe I wasn't asleep? I hear beeping and low-toned voices. I try to recall what was last in my mind before I woke, if in fact I am awake. I grasp at a thin tether of thought. That's right. I was floating as if in amniotic fluid. Warm, cushioned and protected from the outside world.

Suddenly, I'm eighty-one and a half again. I'm drifting in the warm sea off the north coast somewhere, watching the sun as it recedes behind green leafage. I'm sipping my chilled, cheap Riesling from my non-breakable, multi-purpose mug. You have to keep things minimalistic when your house is on wheels.

"Mum ... are you awake?"

Ha! That seems to be the question on everyone's lips. I detect anxiety and a touch of fear in my daughter's usually low, gentle voice. She has moved up the scale from alto to mezzo-soprano.

"I just had a beautiful dream." At least, that's what I attempted to say. I try to reach for her hand to reassure her, but nothing happens. Now it is me in need of some reassurance.

My brain seems as scrambled as the eggs I enjoy for breakfast. Sautéed mushrooms, fresh spinach, lemon juice and a slurp of olive oil. But, I digress. Perhaps my brain is really more like a fried egg, flipped over and running all over the place.

"Take your time," she says.

I take a deep breath. "What happened?"

"Mum, you're in hospital," Sadie explains quietly. "You've had a turn. They think a stroke."

A strange word 'turn'. "It's my turn," when you're 7 and pleading to be next on the communal swing or slippery dip. "She's taken a wrong turn," could be the wrong route in the car or a serious mistake in life's journey. "She's taken a turn for the worse," is something I'd rather not hear. But my 'turn' is the 'S' word.

"It will be okay, Mum. Bronwyn says we just need to get you moving as soon as possible."

"Oh." I close my eyes, even though I try to resist the urge. Who the hell is Bronwyn? I think.

Years seem to have disappeared, but it is only a matter of weeks. My face looks like a Picasso; uneven and slightly surreal and I have difficulty speaking. I flick through the pages of magazines and try to remember the names of everyday 'things'.

Sadie. She of the clean nightgowns, the gentle touches and the tears I can't see but I know are there. Together we shake off the miasma of despair that hits from time to time. The mysterious Bronwyn turns out to be a physiotherapist, but the term Sergeant Major comes to mind. She's not mean or nasty, just relentless.

Each day brings a new achievement. Slowly my walking frame gives way to a walking stick and then to a few dodderly steps unaided. I can now tap my foot with gusto and there is not so much pain. I've been offered the option of Botox treatment. The thought makes me giggle.

"Your cross-patterning is really improving." says Bronwyn.

"Gee, thanks," I mutter.

When I retired, I thought I was stepping off the treadmill. Now, Bronwyn announces that it's time for me to get back on. Just when I am standing on more solid ground she wants to put me on something that moves. "How am I supposed to do that?" I shriek.

"One bloody step at a bloody time," she shoots back at me in her usual silver-tongued style. "It's a special one. It goes REALLY slowly."

"Gee, thanks," I mutter again.

Soon I am given permission to go home with my daughter. Sadie (bless her) has visited the local recycling centre and has decked her house out in second-hand aids. Even the little fluffy dog, whose name I've forgotten, has been shipped off to a friend's place.

"Bronwyn said I had to reduce the trip hazards," Sadie states importantly.

"Gee, thanks," I again mutter.

My joy at leaving the rehab centre and its pale, pickle-coloured walls turns to a sad sentimentality when I glimpse my campervan safely mothballed in the side drive. It resembles a sleeping tortoise that's not planning on moving anywhere any time soon.

Sadie's eye-roll had been almost palpable when I told her that I'd named it Morrison, "Because he's a van, you know."

"Yes, Mum. I get it."

I recalled the day I first informed my daughter of my purchase. "You bought a what?" Her voice had shot up the scale to soprano that day.

"Mum, you're nearly eighty years old. You're too old to go gallivanting around the countryside on your own!"

"What's age got to do with it?" I had asked, coyly.

Sadie settles me in on the veranda with a cup of tea and leaves me to my musings. The cane chair is almost as rickety as I am and the coconut husk mat near the front door is old and worn. "That's definitely a trip hazard," I say to no-one in particular.

"I'm so glad that this happened to me when I was eighty- one and a half," I say to Sadie when she re-joins me.

"What's age got to do with it, Mum?"

"Well, I'm not a babe learning to walk for the first time. I have courage now. The kind of courage that only comes from living. It has taken me eighty years to find my courage. I have confidence in the fact that I have coped with all the curve balls life has thrown me. I have skidded my way through the rough patches. I know I can do it. Seeing Morrison there, all tucked up and lonely has made me even more determined to get myself back on the road again. The sooner, the better."

"And just how do you think you're going to do that, Mum?" she asks disbelievingly.

"One bloody step at a bloody time," I proclaim rather loudly and we both giggle.

Just Ordinary

Bronwyn RYAN

"Hurry up Georgie! If you don't get out of the bath soon, your skin will get all wrinkly!"

"Is that what happened to you Great Grandma?"

I stifled a giggle and came to Mum's rescue in the bathroom.

"Georgie, that's not very polite." But Mum was grinning from ear to ear – and when I looked at her, with all those wrinkles surrounding a stunning smile, I thought she was as beautiful as ever. At 93 years old, she wasn't doing too badly considering ...

Considering what?

Her age?

What's age got to do with anything anyway?

My train of thought was interrupted – I had four generations of my family visiting for the weekend and a commotion was erupting in the kitchen. I scooped up my now be-towelled granddaughter and fleetingly reminded myself to find a quiet time with Mum soon, just to chat.

Joan Elizabeth Patterson was born in 1927 in a small country hospital about an hour from the farm her family ran. She grew up amongst a rabble of children, busy, happy and loved. That's not to say life wasn't hard sometimes – she remembers bushfires that ravaged the countryside, burning fences, stock and their home more than once. Then there was the Big Dry that sent her father and older brothers away for work, just to feed the family and their remaining stock.

But Mum mostly spoke of the good times in her childhood, like her horse Chester – she called him her 'extra limb', they were so close! Grainy photos of her riding Chester are dotted around her room at the nursing home. Also, she talked often of the family games nights in winter when the older kids were home from boarding school. Mostly, and Joan's eyes would glisten when she described these: she remembered the bush, the roos, the black cockatoos, the swimming hole that had a rope swing strung over a branch of the huge river gum there.

Like her siblings, Joan was sent to boarding school in her teens. She found this a bit disappointing – her brothers' and sisters' stories had always sounded so exciting. Her own experience was one of loneliness, deciding pragmatically that this part of her life was just something "to be got through".

The war was still raging when Joan finished school. She decided to stay in the city and take up nursing. She had initially wanted to go overseas to nurse "our boys" – eager to do her bit. But that never happened, and when she later heard horrendous tales of loss, pain, sorrow and the dreadful conditions in some of those war hospitals, she was inwardly grateful.

Nursing became a long career for Mum, interrupted when she met and married Dad. Four children and a busy life in the suburbs followed. No more horses or the bush for Mum but she didn't complain.

She never complained.

However, as she put it much later, she “nearly came unstuck” when my little brother died in a tragic accident. They say the loss of a child is the worst thing a woman can endure. Naturally, at ten years old, I didn’t fully understand this but I remember being shocked at the sight of Mum one day – out of the blue, she suddenly appeared very old.

“Age is just a state of mind,” she would always say – I didn’t really know what she meant but I guess her mind – and soul? – were pretty worn out then.

I’ve always found it difficult to think of Mum in the physical sense. To me she’s just Mum – always smiling, always loving, always there! If I had to describe her, I would say she was not beautiful in the classical sense but certainly very attractive. Dark wavy hair (now silver) that underwent the style cuts of the years’ successive fashions but was never permed or coloured – she “didn’t see the need for that goop!” She was of medium build, not tall, not short, not slim, not fat. The last decade has taken its inevitable toll on her in some ways – she seems smaller now and slower. Her spirit hasn’t diminished though, and neither has that winning smile!

She loved nursing, and when we grew up and moved away, she returned to her career with even more fervour than before, despite her years.

There it is again!

Despite what years?

Yes, she was still nursing well into her sixties and older than her colleagues but she never thought about it like that, not once.

I was driving Mum back to the nursing home after the hectic family weekend when I remembered my promise to myself – I suggested a coffee and a quiet chat. After discussing the lovely extended family for a while, I leant across and touched her hand.

“Mum, I don’t say it enough – you know, I think you’re amazing.”

Rather than her usual embarrassed dismissal of praise, she looked directly at me, eyes as clear as spring water.

“Thank you dear but,” she paused looking toward the horizon as if she was looking back over her many years, “I’m not amazing. I’m just ordinary.”

She stopped my objections with a wave of her hand.

“What I mean is, I’m an ordinary woman living an ordinary life – and that’s not a bad thing at all! I’ve taken the knocks and enjoyed the good times. I haven’t climbed mountains, I haven’t made a fortune, and I’m pretty sure I won’t solve any of the world’s problems,” that smile again.

“Time is very much a part of our lives but it doesn’t have to rule our lives. It follows that age and ageing is the same. Yes, I might be frailer now – and I certainly forget things – but I’m a good deal wiser! Each age or phase has its good bits and bad bits. There’s no use fighting it.”

She gently held my hand then, both silent in our thoughts. “Just live it,” she whispered.

Cows Can be Scary

Winifred SADLIER

"It's a perfect day for a picnic at Finlay's Farm," I tell my baby as I change her nappy and lay her in her pram. By the time I gather pink plastic plates and mugs, and make sandwiches with Gran's delicious homemade strawberry jam full of plump juicy berries, my baby is asleep.

The farrier's busy shoeing a horse in the farmyard. His banging drowns out Gran's warning not to go farther than the end of the lane. I fear the loud clang of his hammer will wake baby and place a finger across my lips. The farrier smiles and waves.

It's hard work to push the pram along the rough, rutted lane made so by the horse and cart. But the bumpy ride doesn't worry, baby. I listen to birdsong and the soft music of the wind in the casuarina trees.

The squeak, squeak of the pram wheels and my footsteps disturb a brown speckled hen from long grass. She flies up in the air with a flap of feathered wings and a loud squawk, I'm sure baby will wake. Still, she sleeps as I examine three brown eggs in a nest.

"I'll collect them on the way back and tell Gran of the nest," I tell my sleeping child.

At the end of the track, gates lead to two fields. Cows graze in one. "We'll go in the field with no cows, because mama's frightened of cows." Baby sleeps on without a care.

The gate is high and I'm not tall, I need to climb up to reach the hasp to open it. When I pull hard, it swings open with me clinging tight. This results in a wonderful ride and reminds me of the carnival swing. My skirt billows out like an old-fashioned farthingale. I wheel the pram into the field and close the gate with a powerful push. The hasp clicks in place.

There are no cows, but plenty of cow pats. They look harmless, hard-baked from the sun. But I'm fastidious not to stand in one. From experience I know green poo squelches from the sides and soils my shoes and socks. Wheeling the pram between them, I find a clean space and set up the picnic. Baby wakes, and I settle her on the picnic rug and encourage her to eat a jam sandwich. Intent on getting her to eat, I don't see the herd of cows come over the hill.

When I hear a 'Moo' I look up and panic. The herd, at least twenty, is so close, I can smell their bovine breath and see spittle flick from their pink lips as they shake their enormous heads. This is when I bolt and leave my baby and the pram. No time to stop and struggle with the hasp on the gate. Instead, I climb over the top, scrapping my knee. Running and panting along the lane, I burst into the house, calling for Gran.

Gran is in the kitchen, sitting in her rocking chair, holding a cup of tea. "Gran, Gran, the cows have got my baby!" Gran remains calm.

"Don't fash, lass, let me finish my tea, then I'll come."

Gran can't walk fast, so I take her hand and pull her. When we reach the field, the cows have disappeared. It wasn't my imagination, because the baby's pram is on its side, and the beasts have trampled over the picnic. Baby lays with her face on the rug. The victim of a fatal attack.

When Gran opens the gate, I run to baby and pick her up and cuddle her. "Sorry, sorry," I repeat, until Gran takes her from me and checks her.

"She's not hurt, she'll be fine," Gran says, as she straightens baby's dress and rights the pram. Once I've tucked baby back in the pram, Gran helps me gather up the remains of the picnic. On the walk home Gran and I discuss how frightening cows are. She tells me how terrified she used to be when she had to pass them on her way home from school.

"You're not frightened now you're a grown up, are you Gran?"

"A wee bit. I don't think it matters how old you are. Cows can be scary at any age."

It was my last picnic at Finlay's Farm. I still bear the guilt of abandoning my baby doll.

It's on the Radio

John SAHYOUN

"Good evening world. Welcome to the Rockin' John Show."

That's my introduction to a rock music show I do once a week on a community radio station on the mid north coast of New South Wales. I must admit that I stole the opening idea from Robin Williams in "Good Morning Vietnam". Not that anyone notices. For me it is a whole new adventure in my 60+ years of life. Being involved in eight different organisations as a volunteer keeps me on my toes, certainly no time to contemplate retirement, although I have been struggling with this concept for many years. What exactly is retirement? Is that where you no longer get paid for doing some type of employment?

My latest adventure started quite by accident.

Quite a few months ago, I attended a meeting of a committee that was establishing a community radio station in a town quite close to me. I thought I'd go down and see if the project was worthwhile to link in with my small rural town where I had served as the president of the local Chamber of Commerce president for many years. I'm always eager to explore new possibilities to advance our town and thought this would a great idea. During the meeting I spoke on a few points and said how I thought the idea was really good and we'd love to be part of the initiative. I'm guessing now my one big 'mistake' was opening my mouth.

After the meeting a woman whom I later learnt was the director of programming approached and said, "You have a good voice. Have you considered being a presenter?"

I was a bit taken back but replied "Only if I can play rock music," thinking knowing what they generally play on community radio that I'd be excluded.

"That will be great," was her reply. It was always my dream to present some aspect of our culture and having a life-long interest in music I felt this was an excellent opportunity. So there were a few familiarisation sessions and before I knew it I was in front of a microphone broadcasting potentially to the world.

It appeared that the excitement had spread to others.

It seemed like any other week day, I was busily tapping away at my computer trying to complete the seemingly endless tasks I have to complete as a volunteer in many organisations I am associated with when the phone rang. So much for being able to write 'retired' on my taxation return! I thought it was one of the many business related calls I receive on any given day.

"Hi John."

They didn't announce themselves so I asked whom I was speaking to as I didn't immediately recognise the voice.

"It's Peter."

He was the father of a good friend of mine whom I hadn't heard from in many years. He wanted to talk about my latest addition to my ever increasing amount of volunteer work. Peter was interested in how I was going with my radio show, considering that I had only commenced my official launch that week. He had boundless enthusiasm for this project and enquired if I was still playing music. "Yes, I still play the guitar a bit," was my reply.

"Well, a few of us get together and have music jams," something I thought only younger people did. I said I would contemplate joining them but my plate was fairly loaded at that point.

"Karen, how old is your father?" I asked my friend a few days later.

"Eighty two." To which I thought 'wow', no excuse for me in my mid-sixties to give up and spend the day watching television. I hope I'll still be going at their age! I thought about people who were much older than me. On one extreme are people who are winding up their life contemplating dying. On the other extreme are those who show no signs of slowing down. My next door neighbour who is 86 until recently embarked on bushwalking as a hobby and had trekked through south west Tasmania until fairly recently. It's only when your body tells you to slow down that you actually slow down. My increasing arthritis only teaches me that there are some things I should wind back on but there's many other experiences that can take the place of 'other' activities.

I'm guessing that age is only a number. Whilst many younger people have seemingly endless energy and enthusiasm, age brings with it a lifetime of wisdom and experience which we can capitalise on not only to be successful at the things we love but also to bring happiness and fulfilment to our lives. In many ways it's all about mindset. If you enjoy what you do then you'll never work for a day and you'll keep doing it forever.

Many years ago there was a song that said in part 'follow your heart and make your way, now don't you worry what the people might say ...'. It's about an enduring passion for the things you really love doing and have a true belief in. It can't be quantified by an age number.

After three on-air hours, I sign off with "Well, I hope you enjoyed the show. I'll be back 7-10pm next Thursday. Have a great week." Off I go into the darkness, looking forward to another great experience. Yes, age is only a number. I love what I do and hope to continue doing it till my last breath. I'll never be a star but I'll be giving it my best shot.

Three Naughty Girls on the Bus

Kate SANTLEBEN

I first met Shirley in the winter of 2018 on one of Mum's nursing home bus trips. Leaning across the aisle, she asked, "Is this your Mum?" Listening to Shirley's soft lilting voice, I sat back so Mum felt included as we chatted.

Asking about her accent, Shirley told me about being Welsh born and immigrating to Australia with her husband after World War II. He'd been in the Services. She explained with gentle sadness that she'd been widowed as a still young woman and had raised her large family on her own. Her children, now scattered around the world, visited when they could.

From then on, she often sat across from us on bus trips as Mum preferred the window seat to see out more easily. It also stopped Mum from quickly unbuckling her seatbelt and bolting before the bus stopped.

Shirley's room was on the first floor near the lift and her cheery wave would often greet my arrival each time I visited Mum. One day on my way back to the lift, I shared with Shirley how Mum enjoyed a small lemon meringue tart I'd bought the previous day at the Springwood farmers' market. She moaned and said, 'stop, stop,' in mock envious tones. Next time the markets were on, I took a tart in for Shirley too. She clapped her hands in delight and offered to provide reimbursement. No way I'd accept. Being the gracious lady she was, Shirley nodded her thanks.

On bus trips, we'd often speculate which morning tea item would feature. Packet biscuits? Boring. Iced cake squares? Mmm depended on what sort. The orange and poppyseed version wasn't popular for those with dentures. Shirley and I both liked the

apple tea cake. Best of all were the buttered fruit scones. Eyes gleaming, we'd each scoff one and covertly watch for possible seconds. Mum would give a queenly waving away of food offerings but would happily sip a white tea.

The residents all had their preferred seat on the bus and Lionel, or 'grumpy' as I thought of him, liked to sit in front of Shirley. He'd board the bus with a great deal of huffing and puffing and muttering about having to get up and get ready for the bus trip, which will 'probably be boring anyway'. Shirley would listen to him and then good humouredly tease him. He'd be laughing before the bus was out of the driveway.

Being a regular bus trip 'helper', I began to observe which residents could only have soft food for morning tea and those who needed mobility assistance be it a walker, wheelchair or a steadying arm.

The regular bus driver always pitched in to assist the Activities staff with helping residents on and off the bus as well as making tea or coffee on the half day trips. He referred to himself as the 'bus stairs barista' as the door would be opened to allow fresh air and more space. He also played popular music known to the residents for singalongs. The song, 'You are my Sunshine' was a choice enjoyed by most.

Sometimes a casual bus driver would fill in and they could be found behind the bus at morning tea checking their phone and/or having a quick ciggie. The Activities staff person would not be impressed. Residents would not be impressed because the casual could never get the music right.

Bus trips would alternate between half days (back by lunch) or day trips (back by afternoon tea). Those on board looked forward to day trips featuring a buffet lunch. Drinks sorted, the serious business of piled little dishes would commence. I'd make sure Mum was comfy, handbag was next to her seat and reassurance given that prawns and oysters would be fetched. We'd laugh together on the way about how those prawns would be trying to hide. If I had a spare hand, I'd offer to bring back a plate for someone else. Tina was keen on chicken wings in sticky sauce and, 'if an extra one falls on the plate, that'll be more than alright'.

Shirley enjoyed going out for lunch too and always had a good appetite. She seemed so well and able, I wondered why she'd moved from independent living to the nursing home. I was later told by one of the staff that she'd sometimes muse that, 'I shouldn't still be here but each day I am'.

And she was. Greeting me with a smile and a wave each time I visited Mum. Encouraging Mum to chat on bus trips and making wry comments on various topics and people so together we were akin to the three naughty girls on the bus.

Until she wasn't there.

I'd woken with a start one night with a silent, *oh no*. I knew Shirley had passed away but couldn't believe it in my heart.

Next visit I stood looking at her neatly empty bed and her chair now without its colourful crocheted lap blanket. Going to the nurses' desk I falteringly asked after Shirley. The nurse and I had tears in our eyes when he shook his head. She hadn't been well and had passed away in hospital a few days before. I was told her heart was the cause. It was the spring of 2019.

Walking onto Mum's room, I reflected on how hard, at times, working in a nursing home must be. Each resident in their care is known in all their moods, needs, preferences and health issues. The staff keep smiling and carrying out their duties before heading off to their own homes and lives at the end of each shift.

Shirley's funeral notice published in the Sydney Morning Herald, spoke of a much loved mother, grandmother and great-grandmother who would be 'forever in our hearts'.

Each time I pass her room I think of Shirley and silently thank her for her good humoured, kind and compassionate friendship.

Rest in Peace Shirley.

My Nanna Through a Child's Eyes

Robyn SCHIRALLI

As a child, I never noticed the wrinkles on her face, nor the greying of her hair. My nanna was timeless! Age was not a trait that defined her, because from my perspective Nanna was everything and everyone that I wanted her to be.

She could be childlike when we played games together, enthusiastically rolling around on the floor to imitate jungle animals. At other times, her demeanour was that of nurturer, tending to a grazed knee and providing the comfort of her soothing voice.

It was because of her ability to provide for my every need that I found it incomprehensible to imagine life without her. I did not think of her in terms of years but rather her abundance of knowledge and ability to interpret my every need. It would be difficult to accept her loss, when that time came, however as I would soon discover, her legacy would continue to enthral and delight children for many years to come.

Nanna's health had been in decline for some time, making my regular weekly visits to her especially treasured. Although she had four grandchildren who were all incredibly close to her, it was no secret that I shared with her a special bond for story writing. She had a particular affinity for children's stories and as a child she would read to me, breathing life into the characters with her expressive gestures.

It was a chilly autumn day and as I climbed the cracked cement steps leading to her front door, I was unaware of the significance of what would be one of my final visits. As was customary, a welcoming pot of tea rested on a silver tray together with china cups and saucers which were decorated with lilac

and white cottage flowers. It was reminiscent of the countryside where Nanna grew up and of which she spoke fondly. She beckoned me to take a seat on the lounge, after which I began to pour our tea.

Noticing a tremble in her hand and her breathing to be a little laboured, I questioned whether her health was of concern and as always, she deflected from her own troubles to calm my fears. I reflected on her same habit of comforting me as a child. The passage of time had not diminished her ability to nurture and soothe.

After she had assured me that, to use her own words, 'her doctor was taking excellent care of her', Nanna directed the conversation towards something that she was eager to discuss – her children's stories. She rose from her recliner chair and moved towards a teak bookcase, which I knew to be where she stored what she considered to be items of value. Secured with a bright pink ribbon were twelve short children's stories, still in their unpublished form however treasured nonetheless. She carried them back to her recliner chair, gently releasing her slender body to the comfort of its form.

Despite recognizing the stories to be those that she read to me as a child, I was curious to know the reason for them resurfacing all these years later. Nanna could see that she had my attention and directed a mischievous smile towards me. I noticed a small white envelope nestled between the pages of one of the books. Nanna's arthritic hands grappled to untie the pink ribbon to access the envelope. As I moved to help her it was obvious that she had ownership of the task and did not require assistance.

She opened the letter and began to read it to me. It was from a publishing house that Nanna had contacted. It was one of many publishers that she had approached in recent times, most of whom had responded with letters of rejection. However, to her delight, her short stories were finally accepted to be worthy of publication as an anthology. It had been Nanna's dream to leave some form of legacy for children of the future and the best way of doing this would be to make her stories available to more than just her own grandchildren.

Witnessing the joy in her eyes, I was elated for her to have realised her dream. Cognisant of her failing health and aware that the publication process could prove to be a lengthy one, Nanna had an important request of me. She had spoken with the publishers about registering me as her proxy, in the event of her health precluding her from completing any of the associated legalities to their end stage. They had no objection with her request and, although she knew that I was her staunch advocate, she needed to ensure that I would be prepared to carry the process through to completion. I felt privileged to be involved and excited for the work to commence.

Nanna passed peacefully after a short illness, prior to completion of publishing. Her family were by her side. I can happily report that her books were and continue to be a favourite with children throughout Australia and around the world. Most heartening are the reviews which are received on a regular basis, especially those written by the children themselves. Parents write of the engaging charm of my Nanna's use of words while speaking of the enduring quality of the art of storytelling.

Despite her passing, the joy that she gave both to her grandchildren and now, children throughout Australia and beyond through her storytelling, does not age or die. It is not marked by years or diminished through death. It continues to be timeless!

The New Technology

Jeanette SCHULTZ

"If you don't learn now, you'll be left behind," he told her.

She had ignored the new technology until now, but was obliged to start learning when he gifted her his old computer. Her benefactor, despite being over 20 years older than herself, was an early adopter of everything digital.

The uninteresting metal box sat on her living room floor for many weeks before she had the courage to plug it in at the switch. The box was attached by a cord to a monitor which resembled an early model television set. Once she got accustomed to seeing the screen blink alive, she learned to play solitaire, but not much else.

With encouragement from her mentor, she enrolled herself in an adult education course called Windows for Beginners. She hated it and resented the effort required to locate neurological equipment which had lain dormant for most of her life. She felt helpless and stupid as windows appeared and vanished before her eyes, her data along with them. Fingers which had caressed the keys on a piano with ease, fumbled over the stiff grey keyboard. The mouse slithered about all over the place and the cursor disappeared. She was the dunce of the class and called it quits once they came to spreadsheets.

The next lesson was learning how to connect to the Internet. A dial-up process allowed access to the Web for a limited length of time. The signals sounded like ET ready to take off. Messages from a foreign universe began invading her space. She had no use for this unwanted information and never knew from her mentor what she was supposed to learn from the exercise. Eventually she declared to herself: 'I'm too old for such nonsense'. Having recently retired from her nursing job, she decided it was time to indulge in more enjoyable pursuits

like gardening, reading, journal writing, visiting art galleries, seeing friends, bird-watching.

Her mentor, meanwhile, was planning another project for her. She was to become his transcriber and editor, he informed her one day. It started when he began recording memories of his early life onto an old tape-recorder—new digital audio equipment not yet being on the market. She would need an updated word processor program and a printer, he said, but the exercise should be as easy as falling off a log.

The pupil soon learnt that it was anything but. The transcriptions were only the start. Placing them in chronological order was like solving a 1000-piece jigsaw puzzle upside down. Then there was grammar. There were more important things happening in his life on the days he was meant to be learning it, the mentor said—like wagging school to play in the creek, climbing trees, hitching rides on the trams, playing war games with his mates. So sentence reconstruction, spelling and punctuation were up to her. He'd chosen her especially for this job, he said, knowing what a perfectionist she was.

Researching was soon added to her list of duties. Names, dates and locations, service records and family trees had to be checked for accuracy. And so she discovered Google. She couldn't thank heaven enough for providing such a servant, despite its complexity, inconsistencies and false leads. All good for your education, her mentor said.

The progress of the project was very slow. Weeks became months, months became years and years became a decade or two. The old computer failed to load up one day and was replaced with a new machine and different format to conquer. Recording tapes split with continued rewinding; those which couldn't be salvaged with sticky

tape disappeared into the ether completely. The collaboration between the mentor and his servant had its breaking points too. His way of telling a story was different from her own. He didn't beat about the bush as she was inclined to do. It was a lesson in compromise where the master usually won.

Meanwhile the future was becoming more uncertain. As the mentor reached his 90s, his pupil became his full-time carer. The new role required that she resume her old nursing skills and the completion of the memoir was put on hold— indefinitely. After a sudden downturn in health, the mentor died at the age of 96.

A huge void occupied the space where he used to be. The pupil found she had a new project on her hands: to slowly reinvent herself.

The months passed by. A new computer lay in an opened box—a gift from him the year before he died. He always had so much faith in her ability to learn. She finally opened the package and discovered a smart sleek slither of a machine inside. A technician got it going. It was beautiful. After the data was successfully transferred, the memoir opened up and she heard his voice speak to her again. A well-known phrase, a recurring theme of his, jumped from the screen.

'It's never too late,' she read, 'to learn new skills. Enjoy your life now, for you never know how much of it you have left.'

Postscript: The memoir is on its way to being published.

Pedal Just Pedal

Irene SHEEHAN

My worst fears confirmed, the knot tightens in my stomach. I pause at the door; my jetlagged eyes scrutinising the hotel's gaudy meeting room. Athletic type bodies sit in a semi-circle, clad in hi-vis cycle gear; a swirling lycra mass of turquoise, hot pink, and jade. I feel old and out of place.

This nightmare was my husband's idea. When Jim saw the travel brochure, 14 Days Jewel of Morocco, and the glossy picture of people cycling next to dromedaries, he was drawn like a moth to a flame. "My 70th birthday dream holiday, let's do it." I had serious reservations.

"Hmm, you know my balance isn't so good these days."

"A bit of cycling practise round the block, you'll be fine. Leave all the organisation to me." I took up spin classes at the local gym, but as the departure date drew nearer, my trepidation grew.

We enter the room and sit in the two remaining chairs. I listen to the buzzing conversations and with a sinking feeling, realise I'm with a group of young adventurers, Everest base camp climbers, marathon runners and triathletes. "They're looking at us Jim. We're the oldest by at least 25 years, it said all ages, didn't it?"

"Just trust me. Checked the details thoroughly, all ages and has great reviews, a rating of 4.7 out of 5."

Hisham, our young enthusiastic tour guide, taps his long pointer on a map of Morocco and gets everyone's attention. He slides it around the map, "Exotic cities, shimmering Mediterranean, mysterious Sahara, hairpin turns, Rif mountains, High Atlas Mountains. Our companies' most beautiful but challenging ride, 4.7 difficulty rating."

"What?" I hiss, "That's not what you said."

Jim shrugs his shoulders, looking puzzled, "My mistake Darl, thought 4.7 was customer satisfaction." I glare at him, so much for thorough checking.

Our sturdy 10 speed mountain bikes are ready and waiting outside. A quick practice around the carpark and Hisham calls, "Yallah yallah," Moroccan for let's go, and in single file we cycle onto a highway with peak hour traffic.

"Here's where I die," I call out to Jim.

"You'll be right Love, just remember the right-hand side of the road, not the left."

The lycra clad athletes are in front of us. Irshad the group's tail rider, is behind. It's a relief I won't be left alone on a mountain or in the Sahara. I'm terrified, but somehow, I manage to stay upright. For the next four hours we navigate the chaos of Marrakesh, narrow souk passageways, honking car horns, donkeys pulling carts and hypnotized snakes weaving to flutes. Miraculously, I survive the first day.

The next three days we hit the hills of the Rif Mountains. It's a gruelling relentless climb. There's an unforgiving head wind, as hill follows hill. I bike at a snail pace, with Jim on the receiving end of my incessant complaining. The lycra clad athletes form a peloton, racing each other to the rest points. First there, is declared king or queen of the mountain, and presented with a Burger King cardboard crown which someone has brought with them.

I cycle back of the pack, with kind and sympathetic Irshad. He soothes me with words of encouragement and tells me I'm not far from the next stop. I know this isn't true, but it's reassuring. I have the option to travel in the support bus, but my pride won't let me. Each night, I fall asleep, too exhausted to worry about the next day's challenges.

By day four, I'm completely over my miserable self. Instead of worrying about what I can or can't do, I decide to change my attitude and live in the moment. I tell Irshad my new mantra is pedal, just pedal. He smiles, and from then on whispers these words as the going gets tough. The mountains don't get any smaller, but with a fresh outlook I cycle faster and climb longer. Much to Jim's relief, I stop complaining.

Instead of focusing on my aching body, I look around. It's amazing to be cycling across Morocco, outside in nature, up close with the donkeys, goats, and dromedaries. Local villagers line the side of the road to cheer me on like I'm in the Tour de France. "Bonjour Madame bonjour," they call. My spirits lift and my heart soars with happiness.

Over scrumptious tagines each night, as we share the details of our lives, the super athletes and I discover we have a lot in common. Fitness levels and flashing lycra become irrelevant, age doesn't matter. Beautiful friendships are formed.

The day I have been dreading arrives; the treacherous zig zag hairpin turns of the Dades Gorge. The support bus takes us to the top, with the driver swinging wide at each turn, narrowly missing the steep barren cliffs and incessant traffic. At the summit, a southerly wind howls and I peer anxiously over the side. Three riders stay in the bus declaring the road too challenging to cycle.

The peloton sets off, weaving their way around twists and turns, avoiding oncoming vehicles. "Follow me," Jim shouts above the southerly buster. I'm petrified but follow like a zombie in a trance. No pedalling needed; the bike accelerates. I gently feather the brakes as I master turns a hairbreadth away from cars, motorbikes, and buses. Around and around, until I navigate the last twist and head towards the final straight. Jim is waiting for me, and together with the biggest smiles, we cycle to the end.

It's then I see the peloton. My magnificent cycling friends have formed a guard of honour on both sides of the road. I ride between them laughing as they clap and chant, "Queen of the Mountain, Queen of the Mountain." I brake to stop and dismount, giddy with relief and happiness. The ragged, well-travelled Burger King cardboard crown is pulled from a bag and placed on my head. I wear it with pride.

The Red Shoes

Elaine STAPLES

Bella had suspected for some time that age was sneakily creeping up on her because she had found grey hair in her eyebrows.

She was philosophical about it, however, thinking that it would do her no good to plunge into denial, to keep dyeing her hair, slather on buckets of face cream and moisturise herself to death when the warning bell resonated like an entire carillon from a cathedral. While she accepted her fate, Bella was not one to fade into the background – at least not today. She was going to the Mall in her friend Glenda's car so she was carefully applying some bright red lippy.

At the Mall, slowly passing the shoe store she could not believe her eyes – there in the window was the most fabulous pair of red stilettos, higher than high, redder than red! Even the magic red shoes in *The Wizard of Oz* movie could not compare. Bella insisted on trying on the shoes. Money changed hands and Bella was the now proud owner of those shoes no matter what disparaging remarks were made by anybody.

At home, Bella loved viewing those red shoes while remembering her glory days as a pole dancer. She could still hear the music, the whistles, the applause and she still had the poster of herself as 'Sapphire' showing herself wrapped around a golden pole wearing higher than high, redder than red stilettos and not much else. Of course, nobody in her retirement village knew of her previous life – her fame. You were supposed to be respectable so when asked about her past Bella replied that she had been a ticket collector on the Manly Ferry in her early days.

She asked the maintenance man to install a short pole attached to the wall.

"What for?" He asked.

"To grow plants on, I'll get some climbing ones," she lied.

A few days later, watching a vintage movie on TV she heard the sound-track of 'her' exotic music which was always played while she was wrapping herself around the pole for the entertainment of one and all and before she knew it, she was out of her chair, wearing the red shoes and dancing around the room. She felt young again! Well, that didn't last long as she hadn't worn heels in a long time. As she lay on the hard floor she was wondering if she had broken anything. Well yes, she had! It was the heel from one of the red stilettos. She managed to drag herself upright by hanging onto the furniture.

How could she get that heel repaired? Maybe by Reggie, but she would have to be discrete. It wouldn't do for the word to get out that she used to be an exotic dancer, especially as the neighbours were all respectable.

Reggie arrived the next day clutching the 'Request for maintenance' form that she had filled in, saying "What's broke, Love?"

"It's just a shoe heel that needs sticking on, Reggie," she replied, producing the said shoe.

Reggie, with the repaired shoe, returned some days later, carrying his tool kit and a shiny metal pole which he proceeded to affix to the wall opposite the TV.

Bella thought that the short pole on the wall would still allow her, when nobody was looking to try out her stilettos if she held on, as long as she didn't get carried away pretending to be Sapphire.

Reggie said, "You know Bella, I'm not silly and I can add up two and two. When I saw your face looking at those red shoes and then asking me to install a pole, a light dawned in my memory of a girl named Sapphire who could wrap herself around a pole just like a lithe carpet snake, wearing bright red stilettos and little else. She was the best and I was always in the front row, whistling the loudest."

Reggie was looking at her expectantly, probably hoping she would come forth with a confession. When she did not respond, he asked if he could use her bathroom.

She had forgotten about the large laminated poster of herself as Sapphire hanging behind the bathroom door. She hoped that Reggie would be discrete but of course, Reggie told The Men's Club who went home to tell their wives.

Bella, at home, was unhappily thinking that her hopes of being accepted as being respectable were fanciful when a strange thing happened. Her 'phone rang hot with lady residents saying that they had heard that she had a pole installed in her home and asking if they could come to her for pole dancing lessons because it would be fun and because their husbands just fell asleep in front of the TV each night, so it was very boring being respectable.

Bella thought that would be a great idea and asked Reggie to install a second pole (reinforced because the ladies came in all ages, shapes and sizes) onto the wall and she took out insurance in case they all fell over wearing higher than high heels instead of their sensible shoes. So, every Wednesday morning there were giggles and peals of laughter as they all envisaged themselves as a python wrapping around a pole.

Bella played her Sapphire background music as she brought out the poster of herself as 'Sapphire' proudly telling them all, "Once a Showgirl, always a Showgirl."

One of the ladies, Muriel, said "Bella, we may be retired but that means nothing when we are wearing our redder than red stilettos, so thank you."

Reggie was kept busy installing poles in the houses and the husbands forgot to go to sleep in front of the TV when their wives were trying to wrap themselves around a pole just as Bella had shown them.

Bella felt accepted at last; she actually felt a little bit respectable until she wore her redder than red stilettos and reverted to being Sapphire for old time's sake.

A Timeless Journey

Paul TAVUZZI

It seemed that preoccupying oneself with getting old had become endemic ... for some!

Surely, he pondered, that looking to what the future may hold would be more attractive than ruminating about the past.

He paused to think of his achievements in life ... a life fulfilled in so many ways.

To him it seemed that life would go on forever, with not a minute to be wasted. The edge of finality did not exist.

Many people, he thought, considered themselves old before their time, confirming that sentiment by counting the years backwards from the present calendar, and not wanting to acknowledge that all that time was ... as merely numbers, numbers that belied the fact that physical and mental ageing were not in partnership

The life that he had embarked upon did not rely on the strength of youth or virility. His choice had not been dependent on his physical strength but rather on his mental ability and agility.

In the larger part of their lives most of his friends had counted their days to the beginning of their retirement, aspiring to put the bulk of their unfulfilled goals behind them. He had seen so many of his friends eventually reduced to the purpose of nothingness when they could no longer play golf and so many other time filling games. Mere pastimes is what he thought, just ephemeral joys with nothing to show at the end of their futile endeavours.

His calling had become clear at a young age, he would pursue a career in the arts, where his involvement would be ageless, with a feeling that he would be as young and fresh in his pursuits from the beginning until the very end.

Mixing those sublime colours on his palette was as exhilarating as it had been some 80 years ago, he did not work to deadlines, time was irrelevant, the experience was still entrancing, if not bewitching.

As if by magic those arthritic fingers felt they spun gossamer threads, the pain was spared from him by the joy of the engagement with his art. The intercourse he had with his endeavours was all consuming ... a true manifestation of passion.

Painting also gave him the luxury of engaging his mind simultaneously on other matters at hand, it allowed him to contemplate the past, the present and the future. He reminisced about the many loves in his youth, the satisfaction of his achievements at present and the excitement that the future always held.

Philosophising about the purpose of life was something he could easily entertain, it was a simple matter of making the most of things, no matter how old ... he knew that age had nothing to do with it!

The room which he dared to call his studio was organised clutter at best. His surroundings did not disclose his age, if anything quite the opposite. Surrounded by memories from the past, and unfinished artistic expressions meant for the future, was where he was and where he wanted to be! As an artist he did not want to negate the past as it was a reflection of himself, just as he wanted to be surrounded by the challenges of the future.

Pride came in the form of the goals he set for himself, dismissing age and the burdens of ill health. Nothing would ever stop him from looking forward and only glancing backwards with a fondness for the Joie de Vivre. Memories made him who he was, just as the future held tantalising expectations.

His art had therefore been the inspiration for the test of things to come ... it had reinforced his desire to search for a future driven by a thirst of knowledge. He had seen so many friends apparently content with the things they had done, happy to literally rest on their laurels, whatever they may be!

It was not what he wanted, just as 'good enough' was never acceptable.

The only concession he made to the ageing factor was to accept that time could not be regained nor could the clock be turned back ... just as it was pointless to seek the benefit of hindsight.

Over the years he had confirmed to himself that it was not a matter of how old you were, rather the fact of how young you were, and how much you needed to learn more, to desire more, to love more. Age was only a point of reference and not an entity in itself.

The pain in his fingers began again as soon as he started mixing those colours, knowing full well that he needed to pursue the goal of the perfect hue to represent his intentions. His actions were ageless and did not relate to any calendar day, month or year. He knew that when he held that brush in his hand that he would stop time and pretend to be a god ... a god unto himself!

His life journey did not have a timetable, no set departure and no estimated time of arrival.

Memories of My Father

Jana TAYLOR

It has been nearly eight years since my father passed away.

I miss him. At times I have questions I would like to ask him, because I know he would know the answer. He always had a good head for dates, and I know he would know. Such as, when did *you* leave Dutch New Guinea, when Mum and all we kids had been back in the Netherlands for months already? And, when exactly, did we live in Tunisia? I know I had my eighth birthday there, but what month did we arrive, and when did we leave?

Or, what do you think James Hillman meant with ...?

And, why did we ... ?

And, when ... ?

And ... ?

But I can't, now, not any longer. I never asked him enough questions when he was still living.

My father loved to talk with me, his youngest child, as he did with all of his children. He usually wanted to talk about subjects he had given a lot of thought to, but were new to me, or the discussion was based on books he had read, and I had not. It was only after he died that I began to read books by James Hillman, one of his favourite authors, and I now understand what my father wanted to talk about.

To his great annoyance and chagrin, I often used to sit in silence. I had tried to respond to things he brought up, but the things I volunteered were often met with shouts of exasperation that I didn't understand what he had meant or that I was wrong. It didn't matter that I thought I was paraphrasing and trying to understand in my own way.

So, silence seemed a better option. I didn't want the aggravation of trying to have a discussion that seemed to cause more angst than I, for one, wanted in my life.

He was not long past his 90th birthday when he had his first stroke. He lived only about three months after this.

On his last full weekend on this earth all of his children, and some of his grandchildren, came together to be with him, and share what were to be our last times with him.

After the weekend and when everyone else had gone home, at about 10.30 in the morning, I went and sat with him. The doctor had said he could have a whisky any time he wanted, so we shared a glass or two or three of a rather nice Islay single malt that I had bought for him. Never mind that the sun was not yet over the yard-arm.

And we talked. We talked as we never had before. We talked about death. We talked about Buddhism. We talked more about death, and what there might be afterwards. We talked about Jungian psychology, one of his favourite subjects, and mine. We talked even more about death. And even more about what Jung may have thought of death.

For the first time in my life I was able to talk with my father in a way I had always wanted.

Suddenly he said to me, "How do you know all this? Where did you learn all of this?"

I said to him, "From you. I learnt it from you. I may never have said all that much, but I listened."

Tears came into his eyes and I could see the pride in his face. Finally, he knew that our one-sided 'discussions' had not been in vain, I had not just been contrary, or stupid, or surly, or whatever he thought I was. I had listened, and I had learnt. Finally, he knew that everything he'd said had not fallen on deaf ears, his knowledge had been passed on, and had been taken in. His knowledge would live on.

The day after this it was time for me to head back home to Sydney and to my work and I said goodbye to him for the last time.

He passed away a few days later.

We had talked at cross-purposes for most of our lives, but I know that for me, it was all put right in the two and a half hours we talked, over a few glasses of whisky. It felt to me that for the first time in my life he was the father I had always wanted him to be, and that I was the daughter he had always wanted me to be. I was 57 and he was 90. It is never too late.

It was as if the knowledge of impending death, and the wisdom of age finally allowed us to drop our defences and we could just *be* together. We didn't need to relate any longer in the defined roles of father and daughter, but simply as two human beings able to talk at the soul-level that meant so much to us both.

I am so grateful for that time we had together. It made his passing easier for me. I hope it was the same for him.

A Trivial Pursuit

Judith TURNER

When Audrey saw the ad for 'last-minute bargain cruise fares', she phoned Joan and suggested they book to celebrate their 75th birthdays. "We can play the merry widows and see Hollywood at last."

They'd been friends since childhood in their sprawling country town, and both had always longed to visit Hollywood. As girls, they swept off to the Hollywood magic every Saturday afternoon. For sixpence, they enjoyed cartoons, a newsreel, weekly serial and two full-length movies. Each week they held their breath as the hero of the serial hung by a fingernail until the next exciting episode. They laughed at the comedies, gasped at the adventures, and thundered their feet on the wooden floor during the Westerns as the Cavalry charged in to kill off another tribe of hostile Indians.

Eventually, they left behind the boisterous Saturday matinees and graduated to Musicals and Romances. The movies presented them with weekly dreams and hopes and escape from the predictability of their rural existence.

As teenagers, they'd both lusted after Richard Chalmers, a local grazier's son. However, it was Patricia Bonnell, the daughter of another rich grazier in the district, who snatched up Richard Chalmers. A waste, actually, as Patricia cleared out with one of Richard's rich friends after two years of marriage. By then Audrey and Joan were both well and truly settled. They raised their children and lived reasonably contented lives until both husbands died earlier in the year, Tom first with cancer, then Bill from a heart attack.

Now they were on the *'Sunset Princess'* cruising 27 days to Los Angeles, followed by five nights in Hollywood and flight back to Sydney. Their cabin steward greeted them with a big smile and introduced herself as 'Mary'.

Later that day, Audrey felt slightly unsettled when she saw their table waiter's name tag: *'Jesus'*.

"I'm not sure how much fun we can have with Jesus and Mary watching over us," she remarked as they settled into the comfortable music lounge after dinner. A waiter named Matthew came and took their drink order.

"Looks like the Twelve Apostles may be on board as well," whispered Joan.

Audrey gave their fellow passengers the once over. "The blokes all seem to be candidates for surgical stockings."

Joan laughed. "And some really tragic comb-overs."

"I don't feel as ancient as these old codgers. Do you?"

"No way," said Joan.

They settled back and watched couples on the dance floor. An older woman danced by in the arms of a young man. She had a fixed, surprised look on her face.

"She's found a toy boy," muttered Audrey.

"She's had a facelift," said Joan. "Did you see her eyebrows? Nearly up at her hairline."

"Cop the outfit! Talk about mutton dressed as lamb! Doesn't she have a mirror? Or a friend?"

"She looks a bit familiar." Joan peered after the couple.

"It couldn't be!"

"Looks a bit like her," said Joan.

"I'm gonna find out." Audrey heaved herself to her feet and headed across the dance floor. Joan hesitated a moment before she leapt up and hurried after her.

"Was your maiden name, Patricia Bonnell, by any chance?" Audrey ventured.

The frozen face squinted up, "Who are you?"

"Audrey and Joan. I think we went to school together in ..."

"Oh! Audrey and ...?"

"Joan!"

The band started playing 'Moon River'. With a tight smile, Patricia turned to her toy boy. "*Darling*, it's our song." He took her hand, and they swept off in a jazz waltz; leaving Audrey and Joan standing open-mouthed on the edge of the dance floor.

Audrey was resolute that they waste not one moment on their cruise. Every port was an adventure. They scattered their laughter, wonder and exuberance right across the Pacific. Each day they ticked off activities. They played cards, bingo, attempted all sorts of crafts and went to lectures. And they were always first in the theatre for the glitzy evening shows. They loved the shows.

They even tried the stretch class in the gym one morning. Audrey's daughter had convinced her mother to buy a special tracksuit for the trip. Audrey had rubbed her hands over her multi-coloured Lycra-clad hips as she stood in the Target change room. "I don't know, Tracey. I'm not exactly Jane Fonda."

"Mum, it will be very handy for the cruise. *And* it's on sale-30% off!"

They found matching sneakers.

Audrey really looked the part in her new outfit as they set out for the gym. Neither woman had ever been near a gym. Joan walked each morning. But the most exercise Audrey had over the past fifty years was giving Tom and the kids the rounds of the kitchen.

Yaakov, a muscular young man from Ukraine, ran the stretch class, barking abrupt, stern instructions at the group: "Lay on floor. Now, straight up leg please!"

Audrey and Joan tried not to giggle as they raised their legs. The next instruction proved Audrey's undoing. "Roll up yourself," commanded Yaakov. Audrey collapsed into uncontrollable laughter and lay like a helpless, multi-coloured beetle on her back. Yaakov gave a snort and growled, "*Serious* face in stretch class please." After that, Joan decided a few laps around the deck each day would be a suitable airing for Audrey's tracksuit.

Their favourite pastime on board ship was the daily trivial pursuit. At home, their team had won the yearly local pub trophy for the past four years. The only fly in the ointment was Patricia's rather impressive group.

"That toy boy is not as dim as he looks," muttered Audrey as they lost for the second time in a row. Audrey and her team were determined to win the end-of-cruise trophy.

As they drew closer to Los Angeles, they abandoned all other activities, spending any spare time in the library.

Patricia's team won by one point.

Joan shrugged, "Well, we got two bottles of champagne. Let's pop one. At least we can have a good laugh without cracking our faces. *And tomorrow* we'll be in Hollywood."

The Tour

Ross WALSH

It started out back in 1991, just five eager young gentlemen heading to the Gold Coast for a weekend of fun and frivolity.

In our early thirties, we left wives, girlfriends, children and worries behind, trying to recapture a bit of the freedom of our teenage years. Out Friday night after completing a full day's work, back lunch-time Monday, a bit the worse for wear.

It was great. So great that we told others about it and it was proclaimed to be an annual event. And so, it is. And it's only got bigger as the years have unfolded.

Every year, in October, there is a gathering of the tribe, still at the Gold Coast. They come from all parts including Melbourne, Adelaide, Canberra, North Queensland and Sydney. There are even a few locals, expat Sydney boys who have flown north to live since its inception. The youngest of us cracked 60 a few years ago, the oldest just turned 70.

And what do we do? Well basically the same things we did 30 years ago.

We just do them a bit slower and maybe our rate of consumption of the 'good things in life' has slowed a bit. But just a bit.

We play golf, sort of. Actually, we have a hit at putt-putt but that still counts as golf to us. We play tennis, swim, go for long walks on the beach at sunset (not holding hands) and do lunch. We do lunch, really well!

We like to return to the haunts that we had attended for years, but sadly we have outlasted most. It is always a shock when a favourite venue has been destroyed, replaced by some concrete and glass monstrosity, but as Ned said, "Such is Life."

What do you do when this occurs?

Well you find a new venue settle in and enjoy the company of good friends, telling the same old stories with highly embellished punchlines that almost resemble the truth.

This may appear trite, but 'The Tour' really does mean a lot to those who attend. Many good mates have been separated geographically, due to a variety of reasons. So, each year is effectively a reunion of old friends and an opportunity to catch up on the good things, and the bad' that have come to pass. There are beers, cheers and occasionally tears as the year is recalled.

Of the original five, four return regularly and two have been on every Tour. Attendee numbers varies each year, but we usually have a party of around 16 at our annual highlight, attending the Saturday meeting of the Gold Coast Race Club, and enjoying the seafood buffet in the Members. Plus a few wines.

We can still take on the 'young-uns' in the party stakes and outlast them, but only on special occasions. The last was in 2019, when we attended a venue for dinner and to watch a semi-final of the Rugby World Cup, which kicked off a 6.00pm local time. We left the venue at approximately 2.00am the next day (actual details on this point are a bit hazy), after it had transformed from Sportsbar into a folk happening (Cat Stevens style music) then finally into a hot nightclub with techno music ruling.

Unfortunately, the timing of this excess was very poor, in that it preceded our annual race day. It was a very quiet day at the track for the stayers from the night before. Age does weary!

Have we changed much over 30 years?

Yes and no.

Life treats everyone differently, so undoubtedly, we have all altered in some way. There have been marriages, divorces, separations, children and grandchildren. Now for many there is retirement and the challenges this presents.

But, in the main, the mature gentlemen who now attend are basically the same group of rascals who got together all those years ago. Only they eat better, no takeaway trash anymore, drink better (only craft beers and quality wines) and play smarter.

We acknowledge that this event can't happen without the support and understanding of our loved ones, who grant us the annual leave pass. But I suspect they get as much out of the weekend as we do. They get a chance to kick back and relax for a full weekend. And to sleep peacefully, without the normal accompanying snoring of their beloved partner beside.

Their only downside is putting up with the weary sole who returns. And the return of the snoring, which is usually amplified!

So how long will the tour continue for – who knows? I only know there are 16 very anxious gentlemen hoping to get together in October 2021, after missing the 2020 version due to Covid restrictions. Look out Gold Coast, here we come again!

Ages and Stages

Patricia C WEBB

"I can't believe you're 70. You don't look 70."

These were a couple of comments passed when I reached my 70th birthday, and I wore them with pride for a while. And yes, I suppose 70 was a milestone. But to me, it was really a familiar date in the calendar, which marked the inexorable passing of time.

My young years were love-filled and indulgent, but a year seemed to take forever to come around. My birthday occurred within a fortnight of Christmas. How I wished time away as the young and naïve are wont to do.

And how easily did my 20s and 30s fill up with my husband and children? Their achievements and losses, their schooling, their friends, their hobbies and sports were mine too. I tied those apron strings securely and carried on, not giving much thought to my future.

My 40s became a turning point where I gained further education and employment. It meant the world to me that I had become qualified, and 'life began at 40' became my credo. I felt I'd come of age, and my life became busier than ever.

But, time crept by and suddenly I launched into my 50s. This stage of my life became the age of 'letting go'. Those apron strings were loosened and untied. My three chicks flew from their secure nest. It was time to get used to being just the two of us again, and that period was coupled with our dual retirement. I felt the expectations were to be a Darby and Joan couple, and that we were to sit on the verandah each afternoon with the proverbial cuppa, and watch the sun set in the west.

But not me—I found I wasn't ready for that. I quickly learned I preferred a good wine and a camera to capture the beautiful moment—from somewhere that our caravan had taken us to! Or somewhere else in the world that I hadn't seen or experienced before. I had become so much more adventurous, and yes, daring too. I climbed bridges, and lookouts, and walked and rode and swam and snorkelled. My insular me of years ago broke free to embrace all that was out there. And I loved it. I photographed our journeys, and wrote copious journals. I wanted to remember the smells, the colours, the people and the places.

So, what has age got to do with it? Though my life is full to overflowing, this stage of my life is different. I have found in my later years I have more 'me' time. I can pursue my loves of photography and writing. I'm an avid reader, and though the clock is ticking, I can contribute by way of crocheting to help others, and I still have time for family, which has sprouted yet another generation. I have learned to navigate my computer and discovered programmes and ideas I never knew existed. I unashamedly spend hours putting together my photobooks of our travels and experiences, and hone my writing skills in the hopes of publication. I have completed a photo/journalism course on line, and studied Family History at Uni.

Satisfyingly, I have found family roots I never knew existed, which has given me the missing anchor of knowing where I came from, and the discovery of relatives I never knew existed. As a result, I travelled to France to pay my respects to an ancestor who died in the last days of WW1.

Time immemorial tells me there are never enough hours in the day to do what I want to do. The old adage, 'don't put off till tomorrow what you can do today', has become very real, for I'm at a stage in my life where I am very aware of that inexorable passing of time mentioned before. As a younger person, I lacked the wisdom not to wish time away. That wisdom has only come with age.

For the purposes of this story, I have found it difficult to separate the concepts of 'time' and 'age'. They do go squarely hand in hand—yet there are subtle differences. The late singer, Dusty Springfield, sang of *living her days instead of counting her years*. I really feel she had it right. What better way to carry ourselves through whatever time we have left than to keep filling our days? Ultimately, I have realised that it is the filling of my days which gives me satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment when I put my head to my pillow each night. And when I'm old? Well, I'll be able to look back and know that my tiny blip in the great scheme of things was well spent.

So, once again, what has age got to do with it? Once upon a time, everything. A birthday year meant so much—reaching double numbers in age, then a teenager, 21 years an adult, and so on. Now, I don't worry about my age. I have learned that though my body might hiccup every now and then, my mind is my key to my ageing. My wrinkles are laughter lines, and yes, they show I have some years under my belt, but I prefer to think I'm young at heart. My life as it is has become a very enjoyable balancing act endeavouring to include all that delights me. So rather than the milestones of age, I'm quite sure now my life has simply been grouped into 'stages'.

And age?

It's just a number.

Surfing the Last Wave

David WILLIAMS

At the tender age of seven, in First Grade, I was aware of the teacher in the adjacent room, though our only interaction could have been when she was rostered for playground duty. Rightly or wrongly, I remember her as prim, proper and a little severe, but I should add that no memory survives to justify the anxiety I felt about misbehaving in her presence.

It was perhaps another 50 years before I met her again – this time as a patient at the hospital where I worked. While one might still have characterised her as somewhat prim and proper, it would only have been a reasonable categorisation by comparison with younger, more flamboyant individuals who had grown up in the wake of the chaotic counter-culture revolution of the 60s and 70s. She was a lady of her time.

Decades of medical practice tend to sharpen one's assessment of voice, facial expression and posture in the search for diagnostic clues. Perhaps because of that, on this second encounter I found there was no mistaking her warmth and kindness, despite the fact that she had been recently widowed.

A disappointment of medical practice is the limited time one has to bask in one's occasional success. No sooner has one solved a patient's problem than it's time to say farewell. It's only when there is no obvious cure or solution that the patient returns repeatedly, unwittingly emphasising one's professional limitations. Happily though, in her case the diagnosis proved to be benign, recovery ensued, and the scheduled follow-up visit was to be our last.

As there was no medical problem to unravel, we had a few minutes in which to chat. I remember her talking somewhat wistfully about the fact that, because her children were scattered up and down the east coast, she had less family contact than she would have liked, and that there were now fewer activities that fully engaged her.

Then, taking me somewhat by surprise, she asked me if I thought she should still be surfing. I must say that this was not a question I was expecting from someone in their ninth decade, so I instinctively felt a need to tread a little carefully, and explore how the question had arisen. When I asked if she enjoyed surfing, she assured me she did, but added that some of her friends had questioned the wisdom of her continuing such activity.

Understanding then that I was at least partly responding to her friends' concerns rather than hers, I reassured her that if she enjoyed surfing I could see no medical reason she should stop.

Apparently emboldened by this reassurance, she then surprised me a second time by telling me that the advice pleased her, because she had recently joined the local surf lifesaving club. As I struggled to suppress any expression of surprise or censure, she described her conversation with the club captain.

'I told Harry that I wanted to join the club, but that I didn't want to be rostered on patrol duty, or sell raffle tickets. I told him I just wanted to use the hot showers.' She didn't attempt to describe Harry's response to this doubtless unusual proposal, but he apparently agreed readily to the arrangement. (What other response could he have come up with, you might reasonably ask?)

But she had one further request of the surf club captain. She explained: 'Harry, one day you're going to come down to the beach and find me lying by the water's edge. When that happens ... please don't hurry.'

On reflection, it seemed my younger self had seen severity, but my older, slightly wiser self, saw unsentimental practicality. I was still learning, and she was still teaching.

What's age got to do with it?

I am not Familiar with that Word

Dr Gavin WILLIAMS

"When are you planning to retire?" a friend asked.

"Retire! Retire! I'm not familiar with that word," was my standard reply.

"But you'll be 65 in a year or so. Surely you have some plans," he replied.

"What's age got to do with it?" was my immediate response.

That was until I looked death square in the face. The worried looks on the faces of the doctors and nurses standing around my bed were enough to tell me I was in serious trouble. The senior doctor later confided, "You were a hair's breadth from heaven." Perhaps I am mortal after all!

Looking back to those momentous events, I remember the previous few days. The long flights from Australia to Singapore and onward to India. A six-hour drive to the remote mission complex the next day. Waking early in the morning to find one foot double the size of the other. I am not a medical doctor but the diagnosis of Deep Vein Thrombosis flashed through my mind. I was in serious trouble!

After a terrifying two-hour ride in the old mission ambulance, I was lying in the ICU of a small hospital in the back blocks of the Indian city of Pune. Tests soon revealed not only a large DVT in my right leg but a deadly pulmonary embolism lodged in my right lung. It was a miracle I was still alive.

"Will you please sign this," said a young man in white.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Just a formality. We need your approval to give you some medications," he answered.

Innocently I signed the paper, unable to read the fine print that said, "I have had fully explained to me the dangers of the medications I am about to receive and give my consent."

Only on my return to Australia did I learn that one in four people given this medical procedure die as a result.

Throughout that day and the next my condition deteriorated until the evening when I looked into the worried faces of the medical staff gathered around my bed. "Maybe this is it," I thought as I slipped into unconsciousness.

Much to everyone's surprise I woke the following morning. I was alive! To the medical staff I was a miracle patient.

Two weeks in an Indian hospital are enough to teach anyone of their mortality.

Another four weeks staying with friends in Pune passed before my wife and I were allowed to fly home to Australia. I'd had a very close encounter with death.

Back home, the medical people grounded me. No air travel for at least six months. I submitted to endless medical tests and began to take new medications. I fought depression and despair.

"Now will you begin thinking about retirement?" I was asked.

"But I am only sixty-four," I replied.

"What's age got to do with it?" came the response.

In the long months of recovery, I began to think about what retirement might look like. My wife and I talked about what was important to each of us. Long lists of possibilities and dreams began to emerge from our conversations. It was a valuable time.

However, I wasn't finished yet. I still had some good years to give. After all, my students in places like Uganda, Zambia, Romania and India still needed me and the plans to hand it all over to the people I was training still had a way to go.

But I had learned some important lessons:

You do not have to work so hard to be effective.
Work smarter not harder.

You are not a fifty-year-old anymore and there is a lot of difference between fifty and sixty-four.

Be more thoughtful of your body on these long journeys. That's the end of 'cattle class!'

Then, suddenly, five years later, it was on me. That dreaded word, 'retirement' became an instant reality.

My flight from Madagascar via South Africa landed in Sydney on the 10th March 2020. Two weeks later the Covid Pandemic closed the Australian borders and put a stop to my travels. I have not set foot on an aeroplane since. Like it or not, I was retired. What's age got to do with it?

Fortunately, my wife and I had done our planning well. In the years since the DVT experience, we had set our plans in motion. The renovation of the house was progressing well. We had enjoyed some great holidays together. I had taken up beekeeping – a deliberate strategy to develop a new interest and a new circle of friends. There is still a long list of things to do around the house, but now I have the time to do it without stress.

It's a quiet evening as I sit in my favourite chair and look back. It might seem strange but in hindsight, I am thankful for the DVT experience. Looking death in the face was no fun but it was time to act my age.

Are You Keeping Active?

Valerie WORSWICK

Whenever I go to see my doctor he often finishes the consultation by asking me, "Are you keeping active?"

Yes. I am keeping active. My chosen activity is dancing.

I first started dancing when I was four years old. My mother took me to learn tap dancing. I remember tapping away and singing, "Oh, You Beautiful Doll, You Great Big Beautiful Doll" with enthusiastic arm actions. So tap dancing was my introduction to dance. When I was about seven my mother started taking me to dance socials. As a single parent, if my mother wanted to go out socially she would always have to take me along. The dances at the socials were mainly Ballroom dances. I learnt at an early age how to Foxtrot, Cha Cha, Waltz, Samba, Quick Step and Rumba, so I could partner my mother.

Sometimes, when a gentleman asked my mother to partner him, I would have to sit out for a dance. I was okay with this, as long as she didn't bring him home with us.

My mother and I loved to dance, often dancing around our kitchen when a dance tune came on the radio.

Another dancing venue that we liked was the local monthly Scottish Society Dances. They were a mixture of Ballroom dances and traditional Scottish Strathspeys, Jigs, and Reels. An extra attraction at these dances was the pipe and drum band which played a segment during the night.

These socials were very family oriented and children were able to join in the dancing. As a teenager I was allowed to attend Church Fellowship dances. The dances we did were Ballroom dances combined with the Australian New Vogue dances, La Bomba, Gypsy Tap, Lucille Waltz etc. My mother was comfortable with Church Fellowship dances because she thought that was where you could meet 'nice boys' ... hmmm? Some were nice. It was at a Fellowship dance that I met my future husband. I was 18 and he was 21. After a two year courtship we married in 1965. At our wedding reception we danced the bridal waltz to "Moon River".

My dancing days tapered off as we settled into married life. Dancing was not a passion for my husband and life was busy with our three children.

One of my work friends recently divorced and suggested that I go with her to the local dance hall so that she could perhaps meet a new partner. She didn't want to go on her own. My husband was okay with this knowing how much I missed regular dancing sessions. The local Dance Hall had a wonderful band and it was so good to be back doing ballroom dancing, getting dressed up in a pretty dress and my high heel dancing shoes. I looked forward to the weekly dancing sessions. However, ballroom dancing can be quite romantic. The close body contact and the lovely dance moves. Most of the dancers were married couples or single people like my friend hoping to find a new partner. It was not the best environment for a married woman without her husband accompanying her, so I gave the weekly social dancing up, before I got into too much mischief!

A new style of dancing was becoming popular. It was called 'Boot Scootin'. Boot Scootin was danced in a line without a partner, following a choreographed pattern of steps danced to country and western music. Boot Scootin was a term given to the style of dance that was first devised by American 'cowboys' who enjoyed dancing but were spending time away from their women folk during mustering season. To do Boot Scootin we would wear dancing boots, don our cowboy hats, tuck our thumbs into the top of our jeans and off we would go, dancing to country music. Over the years, other forms of Line Dancing evolved which included ballroom dance steps. How lovely to be able to Waltz, Cha Cha, Rumba, Tango, Charleston, etc. and not need a partner.

Line dancing presents itself as the perfect form of exercise for older people because it provides the benefits of an aerobic workout, which helps maintain a healthy heart and learning different steps all the time exercises the brain. Also line dancing provides a platform for you to get involved in a social environment, which is great for mental wellness. Line dance classes are available all over Australia, in community halls and many retirement villages.

The dances are graded in order of difficulty, Beginners, Intermediate and Advanced, so they cater for all levels of fitness and all ages.

I have been Line Dancing now for 35 years. Learning new dances, and new step sequences, I find it is good for my memory. For the last 5 years I have been teaching Line Dancing at our local Community Learning Centre. As a great grandmother it pleases me that I can teach dancing.

If ever I find it hard to get to sleep, I do the line-dancing routines in my head and soon I am off in the 'land of nod'. While waiting for public transport I fill in the time with a few discreet dance steps.

One of my fondest memories is of my 93 year old mother dancing with her great grandchildren around the lounge room, holding onto her walker. I hope I can do the same at that age ... and maybe without a walker!

So yes, Doctor, I am keeping active!



Mental health services and support contact list

Lifeline – 13 14 11

24-hour crisis support telephone service. Lifeline provides 24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention services.

Beyond Blue – 1300 22 46 36

Beyond Blue provides information and support to help everyone in Australia achieve their best possible mental health, whatever their age and wherever they live.

NSW Mental Health Line – 1800 011 511

A mental health professional will answer your call about mental health concerns for you or someone you are concerned about, including children, teens, adults and older people.

Carers Australia – 1800 242 636

Short-term counselling and emotional and psychological support services for carers and their families.

Head to Health – <https://headtohealth.gov.au/>

A digital mental health gateway funded by the Australian Government, containing a range of trusted mental health services and resources.

MindSpot – 1800 614 434 – <https://mindspot.org.au/>

A free service for Australian adults who are experiencing difficulties with anxiety, stress, depression and low mood. They provide an online assessment and treatment course, or also help you find local services.

Elder Abuse Help Line – 1800 353 374

Free information and support services for people who experience or witness the abuse of an older person.

Older Persons COVID-19 Support Line – 1800 171 866

The Older Persons COVID-19 Support Line provides information and support to senior Australians, their families and carers.



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